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TOLD AT 'THE PLUME'

TOLD AT 'THE PLUME'

By EDEN PHILLPOTTS :: ::

Author of "Orphan Dinah," "The Three Brothers," etc.



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MASTERMAN, MILLY, AND THE FROG

Told at 'The Plume'

MASTERMAN, MILLY, AND THE FROG

'THE Plume of Feathers,' or just 'The Plume,' as we most often call it, lies down to Widecombe, in Dartmoor. 'Tis a terrible ancient place, and a good few of us old chaps spend our evenings there. You might say we was better at home, but owing to a curious, fatal accident in our families, we be wont to assemble ourselves at 'The Plume.' A most sad case, I'm sure, for five of us have outlived our wives, and be widowmen, while Samuel Bonus have kept single all his life, and Nat Bradley's lady, though alive—more's the pity—have lost the use of her thinking parts, and ban't no real comfort to him. But Nat wouldn't let her be took away. She bides at home with him, and makes daisy chains come the spring, and be twice a child, as you might say, though up seventy year old.

You couldn't call none of us malt-worms exactly, for, though addicted to beer and something better to top up with afore closing time, not a man amongst us but knows when to stop; and Gregory Snow is the only member as don't profit by that knowledge, and act according. But—there, when Gregory's market merry, I'm sure the Recording Angel's self would laugh too much to hold his pen. 'Tis a sort of a bosky-eyed, affectionate state, that don't leave a shadow behind it; and to say that, when Greg's had too much, he's drunk, would be far too coarse a word. Nobody knows better than innkeeper when anybody's got his whack, and never in twenty-five years have

I seen him draw a half pint for man, woman, or mouse, beyond right and reason. A steadfast and upright man is Johnny Rowland, and him and me, to say it without vanity, stand a thought higher in Widecombe than any of our neighbours, because we've been tried by fire and not found wanting. As a scholar, I give him best, for I comed to manhood long afore the board schools, and never had no truck with books nor penmanship, till my granddaughter set about me, and found me a good larner. But seeing as I've buried two wives, and had nine childer, and can number eight grandchilder at this moment—seeing, I say, my fine accomplishment in that way, and that, against it, Johnny have nothing to show but a bachelor's life, you'll grant that my experience of things as they are be greater than his, and takes the place of his rare cleverness of mind. But I'll frankly own that his heart is kinder than mine. Some things make me angered, and always will do so ; but nothing or nobody ever saw him put about.

I mind in the bar o' Christmas Eve us all got paying Johnny compliments, till he said :

“ I wish I could blush, souls, for so many fine speeches I never heard to one time afore ; but I be past it, and I'll only thank you, and explain that you do me far too much credit every way. 'Tis just a trick of the mind to keep my old friends, and go on making more.”

“ Us all want to,” said Farmer Jim Mumford, “ but how the plague can a man do it when it comes to suffering all the fools there be in Widecombe. 'Tis offering cheese-cakes to a bullock to be friendly with 'em.”

Now, funnily enough, Farmer Jim was three parts a fool hisself—a stubborn, obstinate sort of a fool, with a mind and ideas about equal to what a jackass has.

“ The thing is to find out the best in a man,” said Johnny. “ Us have all got our weak spots, and if us

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knowed our own so well as we know our neighbour's, we might be more witty to hide 'em. Did I ever tell you the tale of Milly Crowther and Masterman Reep?"

He asked me the question, and, of course, I knew the story very well, because I knowed all his tales, and had heard 'em scores of dozens of times; but t'other chaps hadn't heard this one, and I begged John to tell it to 'em.

"It shows how Johnny here has the craft to get round the fools as well as the wise," I said. "'Tis a very simple affair—so simple that you might think there wasn't nothing to it, till you weighed it up after. Because what Johnny does at the nick o' time be just they things that we common men always hit upon after the event. He's always ready to help a lame dog over a stile, and he don't make no more fuss doing of it than the fire makes about hotting a kettle."

"Let's hear him, then, not you, Thomas," said Moses Butt, a silent old blid, as was seldom heard. He never did like me, owing to me being innkeeper's right hand and first friend. He was jealous because he was seventy-eight to my seventy-six, and thought them two years put him above me.

Our pipes was drawing suent and our glasses was full, and it wanted an hour yet to closing time, when Johnny Rowland began his tale.

"A good few years back 'tis—afore I comed to 'The Plume,' in fact—and when I had a public-house up to Princetown. And my potman went by the name of Masterman Reep, and he got tokened to an orphan girl by the name of Milly Crowther. A straight up and down sort of maid was she, hard as a flint and flat as a pancake, with her scant hair done in a knot, her face brown, her eyes small and black, and her feet and hands terrible

large. Stronger than many men she was, and revelled in man's work. None could build a wall better, and never weary and never laughing and never crying. Never known to give or take a joke, but a good church-goer, though rather cheerless in her views for a woman not turned twenty-five.

Twould have been much like marrying a deal board, in my opinion; but Masterman was awful pleased with her, and played the lover to the best of his powers, and reckoned she'd make a very fine and useful wife. 'Useful she may be,' I said, 'but fine—no.' However, he offered for her and got her at the second time of asking. On the whole, she was lucky to find a market, for them as never laugh nor cry be like the bread and potatoes—little valued till lost. 'Tis the women that give the men the most unrestful time that they think the most about and always hanker after. The self-contained, steady sort, as be steady in their minds, and always the same, are sadly undervalued, in my opinion, though, of course, I speak as a green bachelor, who have only seen the married state from outside the bars.

"Well, Masterman was a red chap, freckled and fear-nought. A good worker, but he had his faults, and he'd sulk sometimes and fancy affronts without a cause. He was vain of his cleverness, though he hadn't enough to hurt hisself with. He'd been educated pretty thorough, and knew a good many things that weren't common knowledge for a potman thirty year ago. But he sniffed at our old-world larning, and laughed in his sleeve sometimes when I told him about the old charms and the old cures and such like. Yet 'twas just along of a bit of nonsense of that sort I was able to help the men, for you can often take a person's weakness and use it to help 'em, same as you can use it to harm 'em; and despite his laughter and his airs, he was as ready to try a charm as any.

"As for Milly, she worked like a pony for her uncle,

to Rundlestone Farm, and was no more thought of than a pump-handle, which he used every minute, yet never praised, but only cussed if it happens to attract attention by going wrong. The pair kept company for a matter of three year very steadfast, and Masterman hoped that, come his mother died, he'd be able to wed, and Milly was quite content to wait. Masterman, no doubt, gladdened up her life a lot, and gave it a great interest and made it worth living ; but 'twas a grief to her that she never could bring him anything, being a poor relation of the farmer to Rundlestone, and took in for charity. Not that she didn't pay for her keep a hundred times over, and farmer he was always going to give her a present of money when times were better ; but they never got better, so he never did.

“ Then comed a great tragedy, and Milly and Masterman fell out—one of they muddled sort of rows where you can't get to the rights of it, and don't know who is most to blame. But without a doubt it was the man. The girl had her pride, for the poorest be the proudest oft enough. Yes, she had her pride, and he'd trod on it and angered her cruel.

“ Well, Masterman brought his trouble to me, and he had a long rigmarole how he bade Milly up and leave Rundlestone, and how she wouldn't, and how he'd said that if she was so mean-spirited as to bide there saving nought, he'd drop her and seek another. And she'd said that the sooner he done so, the better for her peace of mind, if that was his opinion, and that she wasn't going to leave Rundlestone for his bidding or fifty such ; and that 'twas the man's place to make the money, whether or no, and if he wasn't good for twenty-five shillings a week at thirty year old, the Lord help him. And so on, and so on.

“ 'Twas a proper rupture between 'em, and when chance threw me into the way of meeting Milly, after I'd heard Masterman's side, I axed her about it, and found 'twas right

down serious. She wouldn't see him no more, and wouldn't speak to him no more. She declared it was a very pleasant thing being free again, and at liberty to talk to men and women when and where she pleased, because Masterman Reep, so she said, had been a jealous creature and had stood between her and other people more than was right or fair. But her pride it was that had suffered most.

“ ‘So soon expect honey from a beetle as patience from that man,’ said Milly to me. ‘Why, the silly rummage he tells! ’Tisn’t only that I’m not to do this and not to do that, and not to see this man or talk to that woman; but now, if you please, I must leave Rundlestone, and find a place where I can make money—for him to spend, come we’re married, I suppose. And ban’t my uncle going to give me a present of money some day, when the times are easier? And to name the name of money to me, that have never seen the colour of it, and to order me to earn it—’tis a very unmanly thing. So there ’tis. I’m eight-and-twenty, and know life, and know my duty to my uncle, and won’t be dictated to; and if he thinks I want such a lot of teaching and ordering about, I don’t. So we’ve parted. My mind’s made up.’

“ She wept then and showed me, of course, that her mind weren’t made up at all.

“ ‘Think twice,’ I told her. ‘’Tis only a small mind be made up so quickly. Don’t decide nothing, and don’t let a passing anger turn you from Masterman. There’s very fine qualities in him, and he’ll have two shilling a week on his wages next quarter. And I’m perfectly sure, whatever his faults, he’d not willingly have hurt your pride, Milly Crowther. Belike he never knew you’d got any pride, for that matter.’

“ ‘Pride or no pride, ’tis all one to me now,’ she said; ‘and whether he gets two shilling or ten on his money,

'tis all the same to me. He wants me to be earning pennies for him, and he don't respect me no more, because I cleave to Uncle Crowther, and I ban't going to marry a man as don't respect me. I'm so proud as him, and I've got just as much right to be. Thinks he's so clever that his larning would sink a ship! But he don't know how to treat a woman, least of all me.'

"The silly things went their way, but, of course, it had got to be a habit for 'em to love each other dearly, and you can't break a habit that's been three year in building up. Masterman moped and sulked and tried my patience more'n once; while I heard from Farmer Crowther to Rundlestone that his niece was in a poor way and right down on her luck, and not to be lifted up for love or money. More like a deal board than ever she growed, and, for my part, knowing less of human nature then than now, I couldn't see why Reep took on so bad about her. But there 'twas—she'd growed into his very heartstrings; he couldn't endure to think of any other pattern of woman, and when they fell apart, he began to know what it meant. 'Twasn't even as if her sort had been common, for she was just as rare in her hard, unyielding homeliness as the prettiest girls be rare in their beauty. He wanted her again cruel in a month, but was too stuck up to humble hisself and take the first step back to her; and she wanted him just as bad, and was too modest, if not too proud, to say so. Each went about openly saying that t'other had jilted 'em. Then they lost their self-respect, of course, and folk laughed at them—naturally, because just then a sillier, sadder pair you couldn't have wished to see in the four corners of the kingdom; and 'tis a cruel thing about humans that they'll laugh at sadness so often as at silliness. There's a school-boy, monkey-like sort of stuff in us that will out; and we take a terrible lot of sneaking pleasure in watching a fool's

progress, so long as his foot don't fall on our own corns. We feel so wise and so high up and so much above the poor, erring wretch—just the same as we used to feel when our brothers and sisters got into a scrape, and we'd chanced—more by good luck than good management—to keep out of it.

“Virtue shone in our faces at such times. We was like Moses coming down the Mount wi' all the Ten Commandments safe under his arm. We basked in our parents' smiles, and then, when the naughty boys and girls was sent to bed, I suppose we felt like some of the awful good people will feel on the Last Day, when this and that unfortunate chap has to suffer the full penalty of the Law.

“Presently, having given the matter a good bit of thought, and feeling very sure the silly things was made each for t'other, I cast about how to bring 'em together again. Not my business, you'll say, yet who'd deny a helping hand in such a case? I went to the man first, and was surprised to find his folly still held out. Point-blank Masterman refused to have any truck with the woman—unless she came to him first, on her marrowbones—and that though I gave him a bit of news as to his wages that would have pleased her a good bit; while as for her, her uncle went at her with all his might, only to find out that she'd not take the first step, because she thought 'twould be a very un-womanly thing to do, and an act of cowardice in her. So there was the problem—to bring 'em together, willy nilly, as we say, to throw 'em together in such a way as they couldn't well part again without a return to sense and understanding.

“Reep was fierce about it. ‘Her shan't come it over me,’ he said. ‘Never, never, please God, will I speak to her again until she speaks to me!’

“‘But it won't please God, my dear man,’ I told him.

'Twill vex God something shocking, for He's meant you to be one. 'Twas a marriage made in Heaven, if ever marriage was, and 'tis the man's part, as the stronger vessel, to take the fust step.' However he held out for six months, and I was busy and let the thing bide, feeling that I could do no more.

"Masterman's misery increased, however, and he threw up the sponge at last, and came to me. He wanted to go back to her and get her to care for him again; but he'd heard a dark rumour as she was running down another man—a fine fellow that worked in Pethick's granite quarry—and had nearly got him.

" ' 'Tis a case for a charm, without a doubt,' I told him, and he stared, for he never thought a man like him would have to face such a word as that in a serious spirit.

" ' You stare,' I said to him, ' but I tell truth. There's lots of things that folk laugh at to-day that be mighty powerful none the less, and my own grandfather was a white witch, and well I know he did more good than harm in the world. If you want Milly Crowther back, you've got to do a certain deed, and, just because it's terrible easy, no doubt you'll flout it, for that's the way of the world. The trial to faith ban't in asking a man to swallow big things, but little ones. And if I told you what you ought to do to get this girl back, no doubt such a proud and sulky and silly mumphead as you would refuse.'

" ' No, by Gor, master, I'd do anything!' he said very earnestly. ' I'm in a cruel mizmaze of doubt and trouble, and I've larned patience of late, and find myself very much broken down. The chap from the quarry be a settler. I'd very near made up my mind to sink all and speak to her, but if there's another——'

" ' So long as you do what I tell you, there's no call for you to fear one man or ten,' I answered. ' You go all

alone to South Hessary Marsh, at twelve of the clock next Christmas Eve, and catch a frog there. I was up over for a nitch of reeds in the fall, and the frogs be wonderful plenty—gert yellow-and-black fellows. There's a pond by the shepherd's ruined hut there, and you must take a net and roke around in the bog, and just at the very moment when Christmas Day be come, you'll catch a fine frog. And you bring him to me without a word to a soul; and if anybody axes you what you be doing, you'll say "my master's bidding," and no more about it.'

"He stared, and I spoke again.

"'There's many things look hard till you've walked all round 'em. Who'd think my cure for kebbil in kine was like to heal them, and yet whoever knowed it to fail? You do what I say, and leave the rest in higher hands, Masterman Reep. And if 'tis too easy and a thing beneath your notice, then don't you trouble me no more about your business, because I won't hear no more.'

"He was terrible interested, but yet doubtful like and suspicious that I was making fun of him.

"He promised to obey, however, as I knew he would do, and then, taking the trouble to meet Milly, by dropping into Rundlestone on my way back from Tavistock, I approached the subject of Reep, and found that there was no truth in the rumour of the quarryman at all. One of her friends had set it about to wake up Masterman. But Milly was just as much in love with him as ever, and she told me, under promise of secrecy, that she wanted him cruel, and didn't know how she was going to live her life long without him. In fact, she had almost made up her mind to sing small and speak next time she passed him by. And I gave her hope, and sent her off to Mother Brimblecombe—a woman that lived in that tumble-down cot by Merivale Bridge. She was a clever old creature, and passed

for being too clever, just because her common-sense and quick wits gave her a pull over her neighbours. And Milly went to her, as I advised, and heard just what I'd told Mother Brimblecombe to tell her. In a word, she was to go up over to South Hessary Marsh o' Christmas Eve, and catch a frog in the first hour of Christmas Day, and bring it to the old woman.

“ ‘ And what if she do bring it ? ’ asked Mother of me at the time.

“ ‘ Have no fear on that score,’ I told her ; ‘ she won't. Ban't the season for frogs to be about. She won't catch no frog, but I'm hopeful she'll catch my potman—or he'll catch her, for he's to be there on the same chase. In my opinion, all this headstrong pair o' fools do want is to be thrust upon each other in such a way as they must come together again ; and that will happen in that lonesome place. They'll have all night to make it up in.’

“ ‘ That is if Milly don't go into spasms at finding a man up there,’ said the old woman ; but I promised her there was no fear of any such thing as that.

“ Of course, Mother Brimblecombe saw like lightning what my meaning was, and when Milly went to her presently, she heard what she was to do. And bravely she faced it, being a female with no more fear of the dark than a cow. 'Twas told her she must seek the frog at midnight at the appointed place, and Mother Brimblecombe bade her go well out in the bog and fear nothing in the search.

“ I heard how it went off after, and the man, Reep, came to me on Christmas morning grinning all over his freckled face, and wishing me the blessings of the season. ‘ Same to you, Masterman Reep, and where's your frog ? ’ I axes him.

“ ‘ No call for the frog,’ he tells me. ‘ It have come right without the frog. A terrible queer matter altogether, and

I'm all up for the ways of Providence evermore, because, though 'twas all stuff and nonsense about a frog being in the pool by the shepherd's hut, and 'tis all rubbish about charms and the like, as I well know, but was too respectful to you to say so, yet the watching Lord used you, master, to be the means of righting me and of bringing me and my girl together again.'

"Then he went on to tell me he was up there at half after eleven with his lantern and net, and how he felt ashamed of himself to engage in such a thing, and how he was frightened out of his five senses by seeing what he thought was a Jacky-twoad flickering in the bog not twenty yard away from him. Then he heard a cruel shriek, and knowed 'twas a human. For all went merry as a marriage bell, you see, and if Milly, in her desire to catch the frog, didn't go and do just what Mother Brimblecombe and me had hoped she would do, and sink in the mire up above her knees just at the critical moment. And, of course, she thought the bog was going to suck her down, and gave tongue according. But Masterman comed to the rescue, and then, when he'd dragged the poor bog-foundered gawk ashore, he held up his light and recognised her. He accused her point-blank of trying to do away with her life; but she denied it, and turned on him and asked what the mischief he was up to there at such a time.

"Each confessed what was the business had took 'em there, and no need to tell how it all went after that. They gave thanks to God Almighty, so Masterman assured me, and then he seed her home to Rundlestone. They was in church on Christmas Day, hollering out the hymns from the same book afore the nation, and the few as cared twopence about 'em felt very pleased the poor things had come together again

"Just one of them little plots that went exceeding well,

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and nobody ever the wiser but me and Mother Brimblecombe. But where a cleverer man or a sharper woman would have seed through the game like lightning, Masterman didn't, and Milly didn't neither, and the pair of 'em pitied our silliness about the frog, and said that 'twas time, and more than time, such old-fashioned nonsense was forgot. But, as I said to Masterman, when he flouted the idea: ' You silly zany,' I said, ' why, you ought to take off your hat to a frog for evermore, for where would you be now if you hadn't sought for one ? ' "

FOR VALOUR

FOR VALOUR

SOMETIMES, when us old men met at 'The Plume of Feathers,' the conversation took a very serious turn, if Gregory Snow wasn't there; but Greg never would have it serious, and if the talk touched a subject calling for intellects in a man, and Greg was by, he'd fret and fume and chatter till he'd got us all laughing again, or telling about the things we knew, or what was going on round about among the neighbours. Human nature and such-like high subjects was no use to Gregory Snow; but most of us, with the world behind us, and fourscore in sight, naturally turned to sober things sometimes.

Moses Butt, our silent member, began one night, and for him to say twenty words running was a marvel in itself; but something had happened in the course of the day to make him use his wits, and he spoke a pretty deep thing.

"'Tis a terrible queer trick of nature as makes a man always hanker for the gift denied him," declared Butt. "If us have money, us wants health; if us have our health, we cry out for money; the farmer would like for to be a sojer; the sailor longs for the plough-tail; the parlour-maid sighs to be at the cooking; the cook wants to go in a bar."

We was a bit surprised to hear Moses say such things, and he seed our astonishment, and explained the great idea had been brought home to him by his brother's son.

"My brother, James, wants him to follow his footsteps

in the shop-of-all-sorts he keeps to Ashburton," explained Butt. "And what more natural that the son should step in his father's shoes and carry on the business? But young James be all for open air, and cries out to be a game-keeper—a dog's life, as we know, and sows the seeds of everlasting rheumatics afore a man's turned fifty. And he says, if he ban't a keeper he'll go on the sea; but the tameness of a shop-of-all-sorts do sadden him cruel even to think upon; while the smell of it turns his stomach that furious he can't let down his victuals."

"'Tis a very mysterious smell," declared innkeeper Rowland, from behind his bar. "In fact, you might say there's nothing else on earth like the air in a shop-of-all-sorts. 'Tis a manifold mixture, and the nose trieth in vain to sort it; but put treacle and leather, and cheese and sweetstuff, and cotton goods and underclothing, and fruit and vegetable close together, and there rises up a sort of a tang that can't be found anywhere else."

But Samuel Bonus—a bachelor man and fond of deep subjects—struck back to the starting point, because to his busy mind 'twas more interesting than smells.

"What you say be right, neighbour, as to everybody thinking in their own hearts they be the round peg in the square hole, and hungering after what they lack and scorning what they've got. And, if you take my meaning, it holds so much of gifts of the mind as things of the body and great possessions."

"You go deep, Bonus," said Johnny Rowland from behind his bar, "but I don't say a word against it. We all want to be different from what we are, somehow, and we all envy something that belongs to our next-door neighbour. I don't mean his turnips, or his rabbits, nor yet his bees, nor nothing like that; but ten to one we see in his character something we'd like to add to our own. We wouldn't

confess it for money, but our hearts know the truth of it. And 'tis sure to be so, come to think on't, because if we all see our neighbours' faults so dazzling clear as we do—according to a rule of nature, no doubt, for I've never known it different—then we can't fail to mark their virtues, too, if we be honest. And 'tis only human to envy a good thing when we see it."

"And the commandment that says that we mustn't covet his ass or his ox don't forbid us coveting his vartues ; for vartue be a thing us all should covet and seek to come by," said Uncle Tom Cobleigh ; and never said he anything wiser, though up home eighty-four year old. We was all silent for a moment, and all, I do believe, rather surprised at our own cleverness to think such fine thoughts ; then Johnny, seeing as we weren't drinking—for drinking and deep thinking can't live together—turned the talk into a new channel. The cunning old dear knowed very well that us men never took such a lot of spirits as when laughing over one of his tales ; so now off he went, and while his tongue wagged, his eyes was quick as diamonds to mark the empty mug or glass, or the finger that pointed to it.

"You put me in mind of Andrew Blackaller," begins Rowland. "He was the brother of Ned Blackaller—him that keeps the 'Coach and Horses' to Islington. Andrew was one of they go-by-the-ground little men, with the look of a pink-eyed mouse about him. A joiner and a Christian with a big heart, and a terrible longing to be other than he was. His eyelashes were white as the wall, and he couldn't see very far from his nose ; he stood five feet two inches in boots made special to lift him above the truth of his stature ; he was thin and dry as a grasshopper, with a bit of a kick in his speech ; and he had nervous tricks, such as spitting in company, and laughing very shrill if ever he seed a cat. Sane and sound, and gifted with great good

sense, nevertheless ; but unfortunately deprived of one thing ; and so, of course, that one thing he desired above all other things in the world. And when I say he was a joiner and a Christian, and wishful to be other than he was, I don't mean in the particulars of his work or religion—far from it ; 'twas only his character that he desired to mend. In a word, Andrew was the awfulest coward that ever felt his heart jump at nought. His life was one long panic, you might say. The postman's knock would flutter him for five minutes, and a telegraph boy turn him faint ; while as for standing up for himself afore the nation, or giving as good as he got, a child would have a better idea of doing so than what he had.

“ He fluttered among the people like a leaf, and was almost frightened to be alive sometimes. And, as a natural consequence, no doubt, of all the virtues he loved valour the best, and he would have given his skin to look the world in the face and play the strong man without fear or fright. But that was denied him, and his gentle nature made him live with his knees knocking together. The understanding neighbours pitied him, but the coarse, everyday sort laughed at him, and said as he ought to be kept in a cage with cotton-wool to sleep in, and bread and milk to eat. And that was pretty much the picture of what he had been while his mother lived ; for he was her only one, and she'd brought out his weaknesses and made him a more pitiful thing than he would have been but for her to stand between him and the world, and temper the wind to her lamb, at any cost.

“ Now she was dead, and Andy was a master joiner, and making lots of money, and frightened to name it for fear of the bank breaking.

“ The adventure of his life happened to somebody else ; and if you think that's a bit like Paddy the Irishman, I'll

show you 'tis no less than the truth. You see, valour was poor Blackaller's god, and he'd have gladly gived all his money and goods, and even his great fame at cabinet-making, for an ounce of the devil to strengthen his character; but since that were not to be, for 'tis impossible to make a fighting beast out of such stuff as him, he sought for pluck in others, and liked to know the brave, pugnacious men, and was a very good judge of what real pluck meant. Anybody as wasn't afraid of hosses he highly valued, and when Tom Barnes, the cross-country rider, come up for a bit to stop with his people, Andy set high store upon him, and paid for his drinks, and never wearied of hearing him tell of his adventures, and how a hoss comed down with him and broke his arm-bone, and how he got up again and finished first with only one arm, and so on. Then Slocombe, the runner-up for the light-weight championship of the West Country, was another local man and a great hero of Andrew's; and my cousin, Frederick Rowland, the water bailiff, was one he felt proud to know, after Fred caught a famous poacher by the river, and took him single-handed to the police-station. Yet the poor joiner couldn't get no valour for himself out of these brave heroes, though time and again they got free drinks and rations out of him.

“ Then came a very solemn moment, when the manhood in Andrew cried out to him to wed. He was late in doing so, no doubt, for the man must have been five-and-forty afore he felt the need. And in me he confided, as one never known to make game of anybody.

“ Into my bar—in my Princetown days 'twas, not here in Widecombe—into my bar he came, and the place being empty, he spoke without waste of words. 'Twas a funny catch he had in his speech, and, along with it, his hands would jump and his feet keep time to 'em.

“ ‘A wife be rising up in my mind, John,’ he begins. ‘You’m a bachelor, I know, and maybe will say as I’d better bide the same, with my retiring and fearful nature; but there ’tis: something have been saying to me of late that there’s no just cause or impediment why I shouldn’t do as other men and take one.’

“ ‘Certainly not,’ I said. ‘Whatever your faults, Andrew, a good and kind and loving husband you would surely make; and I’d like for nothing better than to see you standing afore the altar-rails with an understanding she by your side.’

“ He trembled at the picture, however.

“ ‘’Tis what goeth before that I fear,’ he confessed. ‘Once, as you may say, in a word, a married man—then I do believe all might be well. Along with my wife, and hid from every eye but God’s, I can see myself making a very proper display of wisdom and kindness to her; but ’tis all the tribulation that comes firstly. My heart sinks, and yet my soul thirsts, if you can understand that, Johnny.’

“ Well, knowing him, I could understand it. But I didn’t throw no dust in his eyes nor speak any word less than the truth.

“ ‘’Tis a case of faint heart, then,’ I told the man, ‘and faint heart never won a fair lover. You can’t pay nobody to do your courting for you. You must look round and select the female—enough choice in Princetown—and then you must screw up your pluck and have a dash at her with all the manhood you can summon.’

“ ‘It might be better if I went away to find her,’ said Andrew. ‘The women know me too well round here. They call me a proper figure of fun, and say many such-like rude things. And one here and there, as would take me for my money and business, might think

twice if I offered—for fear of the others laughing at her afterwards.’

“ ‘No,’ I told him, ‘the sort as would take you for your money ban’t the sort as would hold off for what t’others might say. They laugh who win,’ I assured Andrew, ‘and nobody cares a farden damn for the laughter of them who lose. ’Tis only sour grapes, and no more than the wind in the trees, and not to be regarded serious. There’s a few, no doubt, would take you at a mouthful ; but you don’t want that sort. You want——’

“ I stopped sudden, because a woman came in the public bar at that instant moment. And I wasn’t sorry to be interrupted neither, for when I thought upon it, be blessed if I had the slightest idea what sort of a wife Blackaller really did want. A soft female would spoil him, and do little better than breed more white mice for the next generation to torment ; whereas, a hard, pushing creature would doubtless quench him once for all, and make him poorer-spirited and of less courage than he was already. So I was glad to say no more on that subject and turn to my customer.

“ ’Twas Sally Champion, the hedgetacker’s daughter, come with a jug from her home out to White Works. Terrible humble folk, of course, as lived in the shadow of the union workhouse, you might say ; but Sally had her parts. She made very near so much at it as her father did trimming hedges ; and she liked the hard labour, and was so jolly, and cheerful as a pony. A sandy-headed girl with great long arms, whacking hands, and a big body. She walked like a man, and cared nought for heat or cold, rain or frost. Her face was so red as a beet, and she was always singing—out of a mouth that went very near ear-wide when she laughed. Little funny eyes she had, without eyelashes, and, but for her voice and short petticoat, you’d have thought she was a hulking boy, and not a maid at all.

“ She came in cheerful as usual, bought her pint of small beer, and wished me the compliments of the season—for ’twas Christmas-time. She’d been lame the week afore, and I axed her how her mangled foot was.

“ ‘ ’Twas nothing at all,’ she said. ‘ Amos Blake, wall-building along with me, thought as I’d catched hold of a stone, and I hadn’t, and it falled on my toes lumpus ! I danced, I warn ’e. But ’tis well again now.’

“ ‘ You’d best to have doctor to it, all the same, for they evils often go from bad to worse,’ declared Blackaller. ‘ You may get it festering, and that often means death.’

“ ‘ Not I, master ! I be so strong as a team of hosses. Nought ever haps to me like that. My flesh be sweet as a nut, and do heal something wonderful.’

“ Andrew looked at her curiously, and when she was gone he spoke about her.

“ ‘ A tower of strength, that woman—for one in her own station.’

“ ‘ Good as gold and a temper like the angels,’ I said.

“ ‘ Have she courage, I wonder ?’ mused Andrew. ‘ Some women be well known to have it.’

“ ‘ Courage ? Yes,’ I tells him. ‘ Courage she must have—to go so cheerful and happy, and singing always, with a face like hers and a father like hers. A worthless man ; while as to her face, ’tis one the like of which is seldom seen for homeliness, though a very kindly expression, I’m sure.’

“ ‘ Must stand five foot ten, if an inch,’ said the joiner ; and I allowed it.

“ ‘ And, after all, beauty’s only skin-deep,’ I told him.

“ ‘ So’s ugliness,’ he said. ‘ I’m a man that modest that I’d never cocker up to a pretty girl. For why ? Because of the rivals. I might go with my money-bags

in my hand, no doubt, but my nature turns against such a mean thing as that. Ban't a nice idea to buy a wife, like a pony and trap. And I'm well used to the thought that a beautiful woman would soar higher than me for a mate. But the plain girls—they very well know their market ban't so large, and if any sort of a man gives them the chance of loving him, they'll fasten on him like a limpet at his nod. 'Cause why? 'Cause they've never felt no hope at the best of times, and when they find a male casting his eye upon them, they'll burst into a flame and love him, fierce as a tigress, through thick and thin. Yes, they'll love him regular savage—just for the joy and pride and terrible surprise of finding that he loves them.'

"I was a good bit surprised to hear Andy tell so cleverly, and it showed two things: that he'd thought a very great deal upon the subject, and that he'd got his share of wits, even though manly courage had been denied to him.

"'All true, without a doubt,' I answered; 'and as for that girl, behind her red face and little funny eyes, she's got a nice, big nature, and in that big, round body a very brave heart be beating. No doubt she'll find a man with sense to see her points.'

"He went away then, and 'twas the very next day—the very next, if you'll believe me—that the adventure happened.

"'Twas the day before Christmas Eve, to be exact, and Andrew was driving home from Tavistock market in his little pony-cart towards dusk. A red sunset by the same token, and frost in the air and promise of a fine Christmas.

"He'd got three-parts of the way up Merivale Hill when a hugeous, strange man stopped him roughly, and Andrew went white as curds and gooseflesh down the spine to hear

the rascal call for his money. Just one of they desperate wanderers as crop up in the winter-time, and chance their luck, and make a haul out of some unfortunate wayfarer, or else come to grief and get the worst of it, and find themselves locked up till the worst of the winter be over.

“ The rogue seed at a glance that Andy was fair game, and when the shaking man offered him a shilling, he grabbed his purse and at the same time give the joiner a sharp shove and pushed him backwards out of his trap. He screamed with terror, you may be sure, and very near fainted for fright ; but then the rascal made off, and Andy, getting his wind, shouted out, ‘ Thieves ! Murder ! Help !— Thieves ! Murder ! Help ! ’ so loud as he knew how.

“ Of course, you may cry out like that on Dartmoor pretty often in a general way, with nought but a gladdy¹ or a rabbit to hear you ; but, as luck would have it, a man caught Blackaller’s shrill screams, and he was a policeman—no less than Joel Ford—him that’s inspector at Dousland to this day. He was a slim, active chap, but with no great stopping power in a row. It happened that the vagabond, skipping off down the road, came full on constable in the way, and Ford saw Andrew crying out behind and the rogue running off as fast as he might ; and he put two and two together in a very policeman-like fashion, and stopped the thief.

“ Even as he did so, Blackaller was lost in wonder and admiration, for the rogue was a big, heavy man, and Ford, though tall, was a light-weight, thin as an adder, and no match for the sturdy villain he stopped. But young Joel didn’t think of that. He went for the rascal with the courage of a regiment of soldiers, and got his arms round

¹ A yellow-hammer.

his neck and dragged him down. There they was in the road, shouting and cussing and kicking each other's shins; and Andrew, in an agony of terror at such a fearful sight, felt his feet root to the earth and his tongue to his lips.

"Ford yelled to him to help; but, of course, the poor soul could no more have thrown himself into such a struggle than he could have tried to stop a runaway horse. He crept nearer in fear and trembling, only to see the policeman getting the worst of it; and so he shrieked out again like a frightened hen, and put all his energy into cries and screams. He might very easy have lent a hand and hit the robber while Ford held him, but he hadn't the nerve even to do that. Like a leaf he shook, and his voice quavered on the wind while he bleated loud and long for help. And then, as none came, he prayed Ford to let go and spare himself worse punishment.

"But there it was: while Ford, under the thief, wasted his breath cussing Blackaller for a cowardly dog as deserved to lose all he'd got, the joiner's cry was answered, and from a bit away out on the Moor he seed a fluttering thing, and first thought 'twas a pony, and then a scarecrow. But it turned out to be a woman, and his heart sank again, for well he knew this was no woman's work. He danced around the fighters, to see Ford, though failing fast, still hanging on to t'other and getting it heavy in the face for his pains; then he yowled to the woman that murder was being done, and told her to run for her life and find a man if she could. But instead, she held on herself, and soon he saw 'twas Sally Champion.

"Her sunbonnet had falled off, and her scant sandy mane was down her back by the time she got there; and Andy cried to her how the rogue on top had stole his purse, and how the officer had stopped him.

“ ‘For God’s sake, run, since you be young and quick—run, run and find a man, or else this poor policeman——’

“ So far he got, and then he stopped and shook with terror and wonder.

“ Because Sally saw very clear that it weren’t no time to trot about finding friends for Ford. In fact, the chap was on his back with his bolt shot. The robber had just gived him a cruel blow in the throat, and poor Joel began to spread out and flatten and get limp. No doubt the heavier man would have been clear in another minute—with Andy’s purse and all—if Sally hadn’t took up the story. Before he could rise off Ford’s carcase, she’d got to him, and clenched her great hand and hit him a swinging crack in the jaw, as would have killed a sheep at the least. No open fingers, like a female, mind you, but a good clenched fist, and all her shoulder weight behind the hit. Her arms were like iron, along of her wall-building, and afore the thief could get up and go for her, she hit him again. Then, seeing Ford’s truncheon within reach of her hand, she grabbed it and got a proper heavy welt home on the highwayman’s head. That shook him bad, but he was on his feet by now, and he’d tore free of the policeman and meant running. He started, but he’d had a sharp dose, and was like a drunken man. For a minute he stood still and reeled; then he pulled himself together and tried to go on. And Sally went after him!

“ Blackaller, seeing her rash idea, squeaked out to her to let well alone; but she scorned the thought. She had a badly-wounded man afore her, and she was more than his match by that time, and she knowed that right was her side also. She over-got him very quick, for she could run like a long-dog¹; and then she said to him that if he didn’t give

¹ Greyhound.

himself up to her, she'd make him. He grunted at that, and ran on; and then she hit him on the shoulder, and he turned to get inside the truncheon and throttle her. But she was far too quick and strong. Never did a woman have such a nerve afore, I reckon, for she fought him at close quarters, and, after she'd got one proper wipe on the side of her face that nearly knocked her nose flat and her eyes into her head, she landed fair and square on his wicked skull with the truncheon in her turn, and then, while he was trying not to fall, she hammered his head again and fetched him down. Twice more she struck him—to make sure as he shouldn't come to again—and then she cried out to Blackaller to fetch the reins from his pony and tie the man's legs and wrists afore he woke up to more mischief.

“But Andy was shaking like a lump of jelly, with his blood turned to water by that time, and he couldn't speak, let alone act; so she ran like lightning for the cart and fetched it up to the fallen man, and had a leather thong round his ankles and another round his arms afore he got back his senses and groaned aloud and said he was dying. And she drew the thongs home, too, and bit into the wicked scoundrel's flesh, till he freshened up wonderful and began to cuss and to swear.

“And policeman Ford helped in the great capture, for he was on his feet again long afore now. He helped, and he praised Sally with all his might, and shook the robber's coat and turned out Mr. Blackaller's purse, with eight sovereigns and a dollop of silver in it.

“Then Blackaller had another shock, because Ford, who was bruised very bad, and had lost a pint of blood, turned on him most furious, and called him a slack-twisted, cowardly jackal, as ought to blush to bear the name of man.

“‘For a flea-bite, I'd give you as bad as that rascal give me!’ said Ford, forgetting his policeman's duty for the

moment. 'Why, Guy Fawkes alive!' he says, 'if it hadn't been for this here woman, I'd have lost my life very like; and you standing there wringing your silly hands and fluttering about like a shirt on a clothes line! A beastlier, shamefuller, cowardlier sight I never saw,' he says. 'Tis a disgrace to the nation that such a creature as you should be allowed to walk about in a man's clothes!'

"And a lot more like that Ford gave Blackaller; because, you see, the joiner wasn't known to him, and he didn't understand the infirmity of the poor man's flesh, and how in such a catastrophe he weren't no more use than a guinea-pig.

"But, whatever else he might be, Andrew was valiant at money-giving. In fact, a generous soul, who never feared to break a golden sovereign in a good cause.

"He told policeman that he was cruel sorry his weak nerves prevented him from any act of valour, though he greatly admired it in other people. He said, 'If you offered me the Bank of England, I couldn't have struck that man--no, not if he'd been killing my grandmother instead of you! 'Tis a sad lack in me, but courage be left out of my nature, and the sight of blood always makes me go faint. But you be the stuff that heroes be made of, policeman, and I'm going to ask you to take five pounds of this money for your share of this here fine job. Not a penny less shall you have; and if the law allows you to sell your truncheon that this woman used so valiant as David afore Goliath--if it lies within the power of the law to sell to me that truncheon, I'll buy it, and think no figure in reason too high!'

"Ford calmed down with the five pounds in his hands, and reckoned as the truncheon might be bought at a price.

"'And as for you, Miss Sally Champion,' says Blackaller,

'the like of what you did, no female ever done afore. And you'm a very wonnerful creature, Sally, and a mother for heroes.'

"She laughed at that. She was still shaking a good bit with the excitement.

"'Must be a wife afore you'm a mother, if you be my sort,' she said.

"'A very witty answer,' declared the policeman, while he wiped the blood off his face; 'and if I wasn't tokened to a good girl a'ready, I'd offer for you, young woman, and chance it.'

"'Let that be,' spoke Andrew, 'and leave her reward to me. 'Tis for you and me to get this anointed villain into my trap and drive him to Princetown; for he'll have to see a doctor afore they can punish him. And as for you, Sally Champion, you can look for me to-night at your house to have a tell along with you and your father.'

"'Twas left at that, and the culprit they drove to Princetown, and found as he'd got a concussion; and great credit and renown came to Sally, as a matter of course, when Blackaller and Ford blazed abroad that the concussion was all her work. And that same night, after dark, did Andrew march off to the cot of the Campions.

"'Dammy!' he says to himself, 'with such terrible brave doings in the air, why for shouldn't I show a spark of courage for once in my life?' And so, indeed, he did, for not only did he travel two mile out and two mile home in the dark—a thing he very much dreaded at best—but he offered on the spot for Sally, and told her that, in his opinion, she'd make him a very good, useful wife. And he told her that beauty was only skin-deep and of no account in his eyes, but that bravery belonged to the heart, and that he set more store upon it than any other human virtue.

“ She couldn’t believe her ears, of course, to think that a man in Blackaller’s position should want such a woman as her for a wife. It seemed a sort of dream of nonsense, and far, far too wonderful and lucky to be true. In fact, she lost her nerve a bit over it, and what the foot-pad couldn’t do, Andy done, for she was frightened, and went pale behind her brick-red skin.

“ ‘Marry the likes of me, Mr. Blackaller!’ she said. ‘Why, I’m only a know-nought gert fool, and hardly a shift or smurry to my back, and only good for tacking hedges and such like.’

“ ‘Don’t you tell me that,’ he answers. ‘You be good for a great many fine things, and too good for some. In fact, you’m too good for my wife, I do assure you, for you ought to marry a brave man—so brave as you be yourself. But as far as that goes, no doubt, if I was to live along with you, I might get to feel more courageous in course of years; and, be that as ’twill, you have pluck enough for two—or ten, for that matter.’

“ ‘You’ll think better of this come to-morrow,’ she said, looking at his pink and excited face with a good bit of doubt. ‘You’ll think better of this by Christmas. ’Tis just the excitement, and so on. You be grateful to me, and all that; but ’twas nothing I done; and, come presently, you’ll feel you’ve gone too far and got above yourself. Then you’ll want to cry off, and you will cry off, and then the folk will laugh at me.’

“ But he very soon showed her she was wrong. He braced her up to a better conceit of herself, for she’d never thought of a man, or dreamed that so much as a day labourer would have any use for her, let alone a tradesman, with a brother a publican.

“ ‘You’d be a boon and a blessing to any man, as the saying is,’ declared Andrew, ‘and if you’ll have me, I shall feel

myself the luckiest chap in Princetown ; and, in a word, I won't take " no " for an answer, Sally.'

" A picture she must have looked that night when he offered for her, for the blow the robber had gived her had swelled up her nose and blacked both her eyes ; but Blackaller, though a man easily terrified by most things, made nought of her fearsome appearance. She was a female, and a proper brave one, and that was all he cared about ; and he longed to have her in his house as the crown of the establishment.

" She took him in fear and trembling—for till the ring was on her finger I do believe she thought he'd change his mind. Indeed, Sally said she wouldn't have blamed him much if he had done so ; but, of course, he didn't ; and well was the man rewarded, for he got a lot more than a plucky wife with Sally Campion. That he could love her made her love him, just as Andy himself had said to me in my bar ; and she did love him, with such a passionate and steadfast fire that she'd have laid down her life for him and fought the world single-handed for him if she'd been called to do it.

" The highwayman recovered, and got six months, and Blackaller bought the truncheon for ten shillings. It was put up as a masterpiece of decoration in his parlour, and he valued it, next to Sally, as the most precious thing he had in the world.

" That was till his childer came. They hung fire a good bit, but after the pair had been wed three year a boy and a girl arrived in quick succession. The boy growed up like Andrew, and couldn't say boo to a goose, though they called him ' Wellington Nelson ' ; but the girl was a brave little piece, and the daps of her mother. A pity it didn't fall the other way ; but Nature have her own tricks, and we can't tell her reasons nor yet alter her plans, even if we would."

THE LITTLE FINGER

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'T WAS just upon candle teening, and a quiet time in the bar of 'The Plume of Feathers.' The dusk of a December night was down, I mind, and the weather nice and open, and the world pretty content, so far as Widecombe was concerned.

Johnny Rowland, who had been sitting beside the fire, along with me and Harry Hawke and Peter Gurney, the farrier, rose up, threw on another scad of peat, knocked out his pipe, and went behind his bar. Then he lighted the oil lamps, three in number, drew Harry Hawke another half-pint, and went on with the conversation.

We was telling about the women, and the nature of 'em, and the gulf that's fixed between males and females, according to the laws of Nature, and the objects of their existence, and their way of looking at all that happens.

"Women be taking a puzzling line, in my opinion, nowadays," said Peter Gurney. "They've broke loose, in a word, and you don't know no more where their scamper will land 'em than you do where a runaway horse will finish. I dare say 'tis all right; but then, on the other hand, I dare say 'tis all wrong. Only time will show."

"'Tis the swing of the pendulum, neighbours," declared Rowland, "and we mustn't blame the females. They be what we make 'em, and when we willed for 'em to be slaves, they was slaves; and when we started sending 'em to school, and letting 'em larn as much as the boys, then they very soon took advantage of it, and showed themselves bitter

quick larners. For swiftness and speed and jumping to the end from the beginning, they lick most boys hollow. And now that they know what larning means, and the fearful power of it, they'll go from strength to strength, and, from being slaves, they'll rush over to the other extreme, according to their natures, and struggle to be masters."

"For my part," answered Harry, "I think 'twas a fool's trick to let 'em larn so much. They be clever enough, in all conscience, with natural cleverness; they be resolute, and tricky enough to hold their own against the men, without all this schooling; and if that's going to be thrown in, then, mark me, they'll get the upper hand. Because, whether or no, a woman, even at her best, be never a domestic animal, same as a man or dog be. Nature have put a good pinch of 'cat' into her, and if larning could cure that, I'd say let 'em larn morning, noon, and night; but it don't. They could always fox a man from the first, thanks to their natural gifts; and they could always strangle their consciences, for the female conscience be on a different pattern to the male, and the best and honestest among 'em allow themselves a licence us men would blush to claim."

"You'm too acid, Harry," said Peter, and argued against him for a bit. Then, from talking in general, we got to particular women, and Harry said there wasn't a woman born as couldn't be deadly dangerous if she liked. He even declared that the best was no better than a doubtful dynamite cartridge, as might go off at any moment, regardless whether 'twas friend or foe she shattered.

Then Johnny spoke of a woman he'd known, by name of Margery Windeatt, and I told of another woman—a new-comer to Widecombe, who was one of the finest creatures as I'd seen for a month of Sundays.

"Mrs. Windeatt have one of they burrowing natures," said Rowland. "She ban't happy if she be kept outside a

neighbour's business, and she don't call none a friend till she's worried the secrets of their souls out of 'em."

"And, of course, then her friends turn enemies," declared Peter Gurney; "for nought's so sure a destroyer of friendship as knowing all there is to know."

"Exactly so, Peter; and yet, if you hold back a bit with Margery Windeatt, the woman says she ban't trusted, and makes a splutter and takes it ill," answered Johnny. "Yet nobody have got more secrets than her, if truth's told. So her friends say. Close as wax she is, but demands for others to be open as daylight. Now, that's not an amiable pattern of woman, and, I hope, not a common one."

"Very different from the women I know," said Harry Hawke. "'Tis in at the ear and out at the mouth with most of them. And it looks a nice question whether the shy sort or the silly make most trouble about a place."

"There's a happy medium in women, same as there is in every other contrivance," I told Harry. "Now, look at the new carpenter's wife. Ann Damerell her name is, and she's a very uncommon piece in the judgment of all who have met her—a strong, self-reliant thing, a good, firm mother, a clever, useful wife, and still all a woman. 'Tis a type that's dying out, in my opinion," I said. Then, while the words was in my mouth, who should come in the bar but Ann Damerell herself!

A strong, broad-built female she was, up home thirty year old; and her brown eyes were gentle, but her jaw was a thought square, and her mouth amazing firm. Not ugly, however, but with good red lips, only just a trifle sharp and down-drawn at the corners. She was a big woman, with a pleasant voice, clear and quick—a woman that had a will and a way, and didn't often catch herself in two minds.

Johnny Rowland knew her, it seemed. He took the jug she brought, drew a pint, and axed after her husband.

"He's very near well, master," she said. "'Twas just a tissick on his chest, but he've thrown it off. And he bade me thank you very kindly for the honey and rum. A very fine thing for the tubes, without a doubt."

She paid her money, picked up her jug, gave me a very pleasant "Good evening," and went off. There was a fine, breezy swing about the way she travelled.

"Strength and understanding made alive, is that woman," said Johnny, when she was gone. "Never have I seed one of 'em that took my fancy better. Her husband's a good man, too, and the best-looking chap I've seen in Widecombe since young Smerdon 'listed, but he's not a patch on her. She's right out of the common."

"Did 'e mark her left hand?" asked Harry Hawke, who have a nice eye for small things. "She's got but three fingers upon it. The little one be gone, and her hand do finish with her wedding ring."

"'Tis true," answered Johnny. "Her little finger be lost, and the losing of it do throw a powerful light upon her nature. She didn't tell me the tale, but her husband did. I went in to sit with him for an hour o' Sunday, and cheer him over his bronchitis. And he's just a lover still, though they've been married ten year and have got four childer. 'Tis a short tale, and I'll tell it out if you've a mind to listen."

"Ann did use to live far ways off from here, out to Holne village," began Johnny, "and her father was a woodman for the Honourable Masterman, to Buckland. Seven years old she was at the time of this tale—not an hour more, as herself can testify. And you must think of her as a dinky, sober-eyed little maid of that age, strong and resolute, and already showing a pinch of will-power as

made her parents doubtful now and again. Other children thought a very great deal of her—she was well liked by the little boys and girls—and another girl, just her own age, was her greatest friend at that time. Minnie Gay her name was, a child as fair as Ann was dark, but the little things loved each other very dear; and for love of Minnie, Ann cared for Minnie's sister, too—a tot up home, four years old, and no more.

“Well, you are to see them three small creatures on a late autumn day, setting forth for adventures down long in Dart Wood. Ann's mother knew well enough that, where Ann was, there'd be sense; and whether 'twas gleaning, or blackberrying, or what not, she could be trusted to take her bit of bread and cheese, and bide away all day, and come back safe and sound. And Mrs. Gay understood the same; so, when Ann axed for Minnie to come and gather sloan, to make sloe gin, the mother was well pleased, and Susie Gay, the four-year-old, went too.

“The three set out with their food and their gert basket for the fruit. Early in November 'twas, and a gracious, gentle day, full of sunshine that found the last leaves still holding, and lit up the woods with a fine flare of red and gold, where the wild cherry stood, and the spindle tree held on to his bright fruit.

“The sloe bushes was deep in the wood—a lonely spot where few men went at that season; but Ann knew about 'em, for her father had showed them to her, and she took her friends down over the great hill, through dark places where Susie growed a bit afeared. But so long as she had Ann by the hand, she cared for nothing and was as brave as you please. They talked as they went, and Ann had some great news for 'em, because her father's brother was home just then, a man as had gone to seek his fortune in Australia, and found it. He'd come back with his

son and his wife ; and he meant to leave the boy in England, but his wife was going home with him when he set off again.

“ And this man was full of squatter’s stories about Australia and the bush, and the queer things to be found there. He liked well to talk, and Ann was a proper listener, so she’d got the cream of her uncle’s experiences and learned a lot, as good listeners deserve to do.

“ And now she chattered away to tell out all she’d larned, at second-hand, for the benefit of Minnie and Susie Gay. The road was long, and Susie began to grow weary ; but Ann’s wonderful tales made her forget her little feet, and she toddled on.

“ ‘ The beastes and the plants and everything be different there, because it is down under the other side of the world,’ explained Ann ; ‘ and they’ve not got no savage, furious creatures, no more than us have in this wood, but only harmless, kindly things, like kangaroos and ’possums. And they’ve got little furry bears, no bigger’n sheep, but well-tempered and gentle in their ways. Only they be cruel fond of eating fruit, so they kill ’em and make ’em into coats against the winter. And though there ban’t no savage beastes, they’ve got a terrible plague of sarpents, full of poison, and many men and women be killed by ’em every year.’

“ ‘ There’s sarpents here,’ said Minnie. ‘ My father killed a long-cripple ¹ a bit ago.’

“ ‘ So there are,’ allowed Ann, ‘ but not like they’ve got ’em there. Why, so fearful common be they that there’s cautions against ’em hung in the children’s schools, and the childer be taught what to do if they’m bitten, and so on. Us won’t talk no more about the hateful things, else Susie

¹ Adder.

will be frightened. I'll tell about the flowers and ferns and such like instead. 'Tis all very different from what we know, and there's nothing common even in a hedge, but all fine ferns and lilies, and such things as Squire Masterman have in his glass-houses.'

"So she prattled till they came to a sunny clearing in the slope of the wood; and there, though the leaves was going curled and brown, the blackthorns fairly shone with fruit, for they'd borne a masterpiece of a crop, and the boughs were blue with berries, all set in bright colours together.

"The children shouted for joy, and Minnie wanted to begin picking there and then; but Ann, she said: 'No, us'll have our meal first, and drink up our bottle of milk, and rest a bit; then us'll very soon fill the basket.'

"With that they sat down on the greenside, in the sun, and ate and drank as happy as need be.

"Then Susie, as finished first, got roaming and went wandering up the wood, where a litter of great moss-clad boulders rose, all covered with blackberry briars and fern. She hadn't been gone above a minute when she called out to the others: 'A snake—a snake!' she said. 'Here's a gert, hugeous snake stretched out. But he's dead.'

"'You keep away from un, dead or alive!' cried Ann. Then she and Minnie rose up and ran over where the little one stood shaking with excitement. They was in time to see Susie slip and fall forward in the rocks with her hands out; and a snake they certainly saw within a foot of her face as she fell. But it weren't dead, only sleepy and stupid. It uncurled and darted its head, and then streamed away into the rocks; and the same minute Susie cried out in fear and pain that the creature had bit her hand. When they got her up again, the poor mite was in a terrible way. She'd scratched her leg all down with the rocks, and she was shaking with terror and hiding her hand in her

pinafore. For a time she wouldn't do nothing but scream. Then she was terrible sick, and went fainty and pale and wisht as a davered¹ rose. She crept to Ann then, and trusted her, like a hurt dog trusts its master, and called upon the bigger girl to save her.

"A proper miz-maze the poor little things were in, and their harmless joy and happiness all throwed into fright and grief in an instant moment. But Ann she kept her wits very clever, and took Susie's hand and had a look at it to see what had fallen out. Finger-cold the child had gone, and was shivering so that she couldn't keep her teeth still in her head. And, sure enough, on the little finger of her left hand, was blood and a dark, purple spot in the midst of a very ugly red ring.

"'Oh dear, oh dear!' screamed out Minnie. 'Her have been stung by an adder!'

"'Save me, save me, Ann—save me, Ann!' cries Susie. And then Ann called home what her uncle had told her not two days afore, and what was printed and hung up in the school-house for the children to see and larn.

"'If a finger or toe be stung, it should be fetched off that instant moment,' declared Ann. 'Tis the first thing to do, if you know how and have got the courage for it. And us must take off your finger, Susie. 'Tis the only hope.'

"Poor Susie 'peared to have got a bit of nature in her despite her fright. She was a solid, strong little thing, not a pinnickin child, by no means. But she turned pale as curds at this dreadful idea, and hugged up her hand in her pinafore, as if the thought to part from her little finger was more than she could bear.

"'No, no—I can't, I daren't, I won't have un off—I

¹ Withered.

won't have un chopped!' she cried out, and fought to escape from the elder children and run away.

"But Ann held fast to her and wouldn't let her go, and tried all she could to calm her down and make her brave.

"'Don't you go on like that, Susie,' said Ann. 'We be only thinking for your good, and you don't want to die, I'm sure; and 'tis better far to lose one finger than go dead all over and be buried in the churchyard. For your mother's sake,' begged Ann, 'because I'm sure as Mrs. Gay will be cruel put about if you was to die. And what is it? Not so bad as having your tooth out! 'Twill come off like a twig breaking out of the hedge, for look what a little thing it is! Be brave about it. Me and Minnie will do it for 'e in a minute, and you'll never know 'tis gone.'

"But Susie cried and screamed, and wouldn't let 'em touch her.

"'Tis better,' she said. 'Tis quite well, and I ban't going to die.'

"'Yes, you be,' said Ann. 'You'll die for certain sure, Susie, and all this time the poison be working into you, and 'twill go deeper and deeper till it touches your heart, come presently; then you'll be gone. The longer you wait, the worse 'twill be,' she said; 'and I promised to mind you, and all the blame will fall on me if you die. And I'll give you half my toys and the Christmas book with shows ¹ in it and everything if you'll only be brave quick afore 'tis too late.'

"But the little one was obstinate, and couldn't pluck courage to lose her finger, though she quite saw the danger and believed the others. As for Minnie, she was weeping buckets, and imploring her sister to have her finger off. But Ann didn't weep. She worked away at Susie, and tried

¹ Pictures.

every argument her wits could think of. None answered the purpose, however; and then she hit on another great idea, and come at Susie another way.

“‘Look here,’ she said. ‘If I have my little finger off, Susie, wilt thou? You’ll see then that ’tis nothing at all, and then you’ll be brave.’

“‘You mustn’t, you mustn’t!’ cried Minnie; but the other meant it.

“‘I was put to mind Susie, and I gived your mother my word to watch over her,’ she said, ‘and now I offer to do to myself what did ought to be done for her. Her finger be growing dead by the look of it, and if that happen, no doubt she’ll die too.’

“Then Susie, after a good few more tears and tremblings, decided that she’d screw herself up to it, if only Ann would do so first; and Ann praised her and said: ‘That’s right, then. You see me!’

“By Gor! I’d have liked to be there to watch her. Only seven year old, mind, but there was the courage and the pluck of a regiment of soldiers in her. She didn’t feel and she didn’t fear. Her heart and soul were bent on saving the lesser child, and that she might have a better chance to do it, she set the example without flinching, and did what she promised to do in a minute from the time that Susie spoke. And, what’s more, she had to do it single-handed, for Minnie wouldn’t help her and wouldn’t look. But Susie watched everything, and forgot her own troubles for a bit while she did so; and the other child ran away and hid her face, and put her fingers in her ears for fear Ann would shriek. Of course Ann didn’t—not she! She just took a sharp, heavy stone and laid her little finger on a boulder, and set her teeth, and done what she said she would. ’Twas over in a moment, and she wrapped up her hand in a piece of her petticoat.

“ ‘There—’tis nothing at all!’ she said. ‘Now, Susie, be a brave girl and——’

“ I suppose she went a bit pale, perhaps, and shook in her speech. Anyway, the little one wasn’t hoodwinked by Ann’s smile. She hesitated and refused again. Minnie came back and helped Ann to beg; but no, ‘I’d sooner die home along with mother!’ said Susie.

“ Then while still they talked and prayed her, by good chance some keepers and gentlefolk came along shooting pheasants, and Squire Masterman was there, and his son and a doctor from Bovey. The childer told him all about it, and he was properly astonished to hear such a tale; and Ann begged him to look to Susie and take her little finger off so quick as he could. But he explained ’twas too late now, and that the poison—such as it was—had flowed through her long afore. Then he looked to the wound and found Susie had been bit all right; but she seemed pretty full of fight, and he said the poison dose was very small, and he bade a man carry her home. He went also with her, so as to tell the mother about poultices, and rest and quiet, and the proper food, and so on. And, of course, he looked to Ann likewise, and treated her poor little hand very clever and tender.

“ In the upshot, Susie Gay came through very well, and made a good recovery. In fact, she weren’t even sickly and queer above a week, being a strong and hardy little creature, with healthy blood in her veins. She went back to school presently, and was a very great and famous heroine amongst her friends; but, naturally, the people didn’t make so much fuss over her as what they did over Ann. Man and woman be very quick to mark a real brave thing when they see it, and the child was patted on the back, and her parents were proud of her. ‘ ’Twas not so much the thing in itself,’ her father said, ‘ as the mind behind

the thing.' And he even declared that 'twas a thousand pities his girl weren't a boy, because then such high qualities would have had a better chance of shining when she grew up. But Ann's mother—who was a great believer in her own sex—said that, for her part, she'd never known the boy as would have done what Ann done. ' 'Tisn't only the bravery,' said Ann's mother; ' 'tis the unselfishness; 'tis the giving up for another what she knew she could never have again. A boy will be brave enough, I grant you; a boy would jump in the river to save another; but 'twould take a girl to do what my Ann done.'

“ And many of the people thought she was right.”

A BARGAIN'S A BARGAIN

A BARGAIN'S A BARGAIN

THERE was a good bit of gloom cast over Widecombe when Nat Bradley's poor wife at last went home. Because, you see, she took her own life most resolute—quite the last thing that was ever to have been expected from such a peaceful, simple creature; and Nat said that he'd rather she'd have lived on till the Day of Doom than go out of it in such a sad and shocking fashion. Of course, poor bird-witted woman, no blame attached to her. It weren't even 'suicide while in a state of insane mind,' because her mind was gone years and years afore she did the deed.

We was standing Bradley his liquor on the evening after the funeral, and he was a good bit cheered up by that time, and towards the end of the evening, when mellow, he even named an elderly female or two in confidence to me and Johnny Rowland. But before that our talk had touched not a few fellow-creatures here and there as was known to have took their own lives; and some men—Samuel Bonus and Farmer Jim Mumford among the number—stoutly held to it that no sane human ever yet did away with himself; whereas I—Tom Turtle, as be telling this tale—and Moses Butt, our silent member, and Peter Gurney, the farrier, and Gregory Snow, declared most steadfast that such was not the case. For 'twas common knowledge amongst us how a weak but sane creature once and again had cut his throat to escape the consequences of his own folly, or bad luck, as the case might be. And

Peter called home more stories than me, and could show also how the quality do oftenest perform the rash act. In fact, he told the tale of Sir William Hawkford, Knight of the Bath, a learned judge of old time, as found life not worth living, and went out of it very clever by making his servant destroy him in all ignorance of what he did.

This judge had a great park, and in it was game and deer. And Sir William called the keeper to him and charged him with being a slack and lazy man, because the deer was being slain and stolen. So he rated the keeper very stern, and bade him be brisker in his nightly rounds, and have no parley with any poacher he might come upon, but, if such a man couldn't give account of himself, to shoot him at sight.

This the keeper undertook to do on pain of losing his post, and soon enough he was called to keep his word. For there came a dark, wild winter's night, fit for trouble ; and there, sure enough, under the light of a flying moon, the servant, on his rounds, discovered a strange figure walking in the park alone. He challenged, but got no answer ; then, having warned the poor wretch that his life would pay the forfeit, fired upon him and dropped him in his tracks. The judge's self he slew—a very terrible deed, for certain. 'Twas thus Sir William chose to end his doleful days ; and none blamed the keeper, I believe, and why should they ? And none could honestly say the judge was mad.

But Bonus and Mumford, even after they'd heard this cunning tale, held that it proved nothing, and Sir William was out of his senses to have lighted on such a plan.

“ 'Tis the cruel wit of madness,” said Bonus. “ No man with all his intellects could have done such a clever thing. For he tried to cheat the Recording Angel, and who but a madman ever thought to do that ? ”

Then we all got arguing on the subject, and the talk ran so deep and wise that a man here and there forgot to drink his liquor. And when Johnny Rowland seed his mugs and tankards standing still, he felt 'twas time to cut in and change the subject.

"Say what you will, souls, 'tis a vile thing, and history shows it," he declared. "Why for did our antecessors bury such rash and wilful creatures at a cross roads with a stake drove through 'em? Why, to show what they thought of it; and whatever the heathen may have done in their ignorance, 'tis quite clear us Christians didn't ought to have no truck with the subject. 'Tis a Christian crime to do murder on yourself, and 'tis just as cowardly to want to live longer than you ought as 'tis to want to live shorter. And that puts me in mind of a very funny story; so the sooner you get on with your liquor and light up your pipes again, the better, for 'tis growing late.

With that he told the tale of Toby Brimblecombe, the son of the old white witch as lived to Rundlestone; and, for once in a way, 'twas a story that even I hadn't heard Johnny tell afore. And being a thought quicker at a joke than my neighbours, I led the laughter; for 'tis a very funny tale, without any doubt, though you'd never think so from the beginning of it.

"This here Tobias Brimblecombe was a furze-cutter," began Rowland, "and he done his simple work very well, and crept through his life till he was eight-and-thirty in a very proper way for such a terrible humble sort of man. But then things happened to him, as they will to the least of us, for I believe there's hardly anybody turned of fifty as can honestly say they haven't had one adventure in their lives.

"And Toby's adventure was over a woman. It began well, but turned out badly, as dealings with the women so

often do when the men be built of weak stuff. If you be going to them, you must keep a stiff upper lip and a commanding eye and a manly tone in your voice. Let 'em know you'll stand no nonsense from the outset, for if they think you will, then nonsensical they'll be, according to the natural instinct and temper of them. Just a pinch of fear goes to a happy marriage ; and the fear's got to be on the woman's side, for if 'tis t'other, then you'll get a poor come-along-of-it, and food for sneering, or laughter, or pity, according to the spectator's point of view."

"We don't forget you'm a bachelor, Johnny," said Gregory Snow ; and then Rowland laughed his jolly laugh and went on.

"Well, Brimblecombe, reaching the ripe age of thirty-eight, dared to lift his eyes to a woman and offered for her against his mother's advice. But for once, being terrible excited at the brave idea of having a female for hisself, Tobias held on and courted her to the best of his poor powers and won her. She was a draggle-tailed, good-natured creature so old as him, and she lived by gathering watercresses and selling them in Tavistock. She lodged along with a widow down to Merivale, and Susan Ellis was her name. If she'd been cleaned and rayed in tidy clothes, she might have passed muster very well, but, as it was, her looked more like a mommet to fright the birds from the corn than a woman with hopes and fears and an immortal soul. Brown hair and a brown face and a mouth for ever laughing ; for 'tis a trick of Providence, that balances all so fair, that them with least tol augh about do often laugh the most. And she accepted Toby Brimblecombe, and he bought her a new gown and made her give up gathering cresses, and insisted that she should keep her face clean.

"They ordained to wed when the man turned forty, and 'twas his idea it should be so, because there was a lot

of small caution in his nature, and he judged that if they kept company for two years, they'd get to know about each other's characters and larn a few things better larned afore marriage than after. 'Twas very wise, of course, but when trouble happened, and Toby's plans miscarried, he hadn't sense to see his luck, but cussed hisself something shocking for a thick-headed, short-sighted zany.

"In a word, the woman, Susan Ellis, got work at an inn—on the strength of her fine new gown and clean face, 'twas said. And she turned out a very good worker and a very soft-tongued, pleasant creature. Then her prosperity spoiled her, so far as poor Toby was concerned, and the very last thing as he counted upon began to happen. All was going well with him, and he thought more of Susan and was prouder of her than ever; but, as ill-luck would have it, owing to her increased prosperity and the larger experience of males that her work at the inn gave her, she began to see Toby wasn't the only man in the world, and that, as a matter of harsh fact, he was a very poor pattern of husband in mind, body, and pocket.

"Even that wouldn't have done much harm, I suppose, but then there came along Anthony Westaway, a widower of solid means. He farmed a tenement over to Brownberry, and was a cheerful, kind-hearted creature, as loved a joke and better liked to be with laughter-makers than the long-faced sort. I don't say 'twas honest, or fair, or a proper thing to do, but the strong will ride rough-shod over the weak till the end of time, and there be those who'll tell you 'tis a good thing they do; for if the weak had it all their own way, then the strong would be smothered out of the earth, and no doubt that would be a pity for some reasons.

"Be that as it may, Anthony, despite his grey whiskers and five-and-fifty years, was thrice the man poor Toby

was ; and he got Susan away from Toby, and he didn't want to wait two years, nor yet two minutes. So before Toby fairly realised what a shameful and scandalous thing had been done to him, his sweetheart was another man's wife.

" Susan told him all about it, and said she was cruel sorry, and awful ashamed of herself and a lot more like that ; but she was firm. She made it quite clear that she liked Tobias well, and was very grateful to him for all he'd done to lift her, and should always remember him with lively good-will ; but she found as she liked Anthony a lot better.

" ' You can only live your life through once,' said Susan, ' and I feel that I'll suit Mr. Westaway better than I'd suit you in the long run. And I'm sure the woman's born who'll make you a fine, useful wife yet. So I beg you'll seek her, and take no offence where none be intended.'

" 'Tis a hard world, and people didn't shed many tears over Toby. The general feeling seemed to be that if he wasn't man enough to keep her, so much the worse for him and the better for the human race. Because the strongest male wins in Nature, and though among the upper people, owing to money, and titles, and outside things like that, the women will marry any knock-kneed trash for the sake of what goes with him, with us common folk there's no bait on the hook more than Nature puts there, and, as a rule, 'tis the best man wins, because the mindless women ban't dazzled with rubbish, like the pictures and gilt and glass hung outside a peep-show to draw the folk in.

" So Susan wedded the better man, and broke her work and obeyed the call of Nature, and Tobias took on something dreadful, and gave out afore the face of the nation that he meant to do away with himself. Nobody worried much about that, not even his mother ; and when I axed

the old woman about it—'twas the time I went to her over the matter of my potman and his girl—she said that I needn't fear for Tobias.

“ ‘He's all right,’ declared Mother Brimblecombe. ‘I know Toby better than anybody else, and I know he ban't built to destroy himself any more than he be built to destroy you or me. His heart is soft, and though I grant this matter have hardened it a lot, and made a man of him a'most, yet it won't come to anything. He ban't built to win and keep a woman, and this is the best thing that could have happened, for she was a joyous, full-blooded thing, terrible hungry to get all she could out of life. And Lord knows what her past was, or her future will be. In fact, as the man's mother, I was very glad when she dropped Toby, and I won't say, between you and me and the teapot, but that I may have had a bit to do with it behind the scenes. Anyway, in justice to Farmer Westaway, I may tell you he called upon me a week before he asked Susan to throw over my son, and I told him to go right on, as the nature in him prompted, and that if the woman said “Yes,” I should be the last to grumble, or do him any harm for his pains.’

“ You see, Westaway, for all his fun and frolic, was a superstitious man, and if Toby's mother had threatened to overlook him and do him evil for taking Toby's girl, such was the belief in Mother Brimblecombe's powers among the older people at that time, that I don't think he'd have gone on.

“ So there it stood, and Tobias let it be known high and low that he was going to kill hisself ; and he told Susan the same a week after her marriage. In fact, he went all the way to Brownberry so to do ; and Farmer Westaway was home at the time, and made the poor chap come in and have his dinner along with them. He wouldn't take no

denial, and Toby ate and drank, though he swore that he couldn't let down his food in comfort, and afore he went away he told Susan that it wouldn't make no difference to his plans, and that he was as determined as ever to kill himself, and that the guilt and the ghost would be her portion. She bore up pretty well, and hoped as he'd play the man and think better of it ; and then he went home to his mother.

“ The very day after, so I heard, a chap come up to see Toby at his work, furze-cutting under the Staple Tors, and the man was named Charlie Bates, from the village of Sampford Spiney. Tobias knew him. They were birds of a feather, and, if anything, Bates was simpler and humbler than Brimblecombe himself. A slack-twisted chap, with a poor, little yellow beard you could see through, and silly blue eyes, and a round face like an owl. In fact, as I said the fust time I saw him, you'd have expected to hear the man hoot rather than speak.

“ They talked together, and Charlie explained as he'd heard about Toby's great intention, and wanted to know if 'twas true.

“ ‘ Yes, 'tis, ’ said the furze-cutter. ‘ I've been treated something shameful, and I ban't going to suffer it. I'm so good as a dead man, though I stand here talking to you this moment. And when I'm gone, the nation will ring with it, and that Westaway will be disowned by all proper people.’

“ ‘ The bravery ! ’ says Bates. ‘ To think of what a courageous chap you be ! And when shall 'e do the rash act, Tobias ? ’

“ ‘ In my own time, ’ answers the other. ‘ I won't be accountable to anybody. I'll just go when I please.’

“ ‘ Will it be in a fortnight, I wonder ? ’ asks Charles.

“ ‘ Maybe it will, and maybe it won't ; and why for do you want to know ? ’ answers back the doomed man.

“ ‘ Because I'm terrible wishful to get your job, ' explains Charlie Bates. ‘ You see, me and my master, Mr. Maydew, are out, along of me letting a sow and her litter into the lettuce bed by an unfortunate accident. So I be going this day month ; and if 'tis your terrible purpose to slay yourself inside that time, your master, Mr. Hannaford, will want a new furze-cutter, and that be work I'm very clever at. ’

“ ‘ Ah, 'tis everybody for hisself in this world, I see ! ’ says Toby, with great bitterness in his voice. ‘ And so I'll be for myself, too. I haven't gived Hannaford notice yet, for I never thought of a little thing like that, standing as I do, on the edge of the grave. But there 'tis—nobody does nothing for nothing nowadays. So you'd best tell me what you'll pay me if I tell you the exact date. ’

“ ‘ Don't you do that, for the Lord's sake ! ’ says Charlie, bursting out in a perspiration all over. ‘ Because, if I knowed that, I'd feel myself, as a good man, called upon to tell the police, and you wouldn't like for me to do so. ’

“ But Toby laughed.

“ ‘ Tell them so much as you please—I laugh at 'em ! Why, inspector stopped me in Princetown a week ago, and a crowd came round in a minute, and I was the middle of it, and a marked man ! And inspector, he warned me that if I persisted in taking my life, the consequences might be very serious ; and I snapped my fingers at the fellow, and told him that I didn't care no more for the consequences than a bird in a tree ! ’

“ Charles considered then, because he didn't think it would have come to a question of cash about Toby's work. But evidently Brimblecombe wanted to get something out of the deal.

“ ‘ I suppose your idea is to spend a bit of money and have a final flare up afore you go ? ’ asked Bates ; and

Tobias, who hadn't thought of any such thing, remembered that 'tis an ill wind that bloweth nobody any good, and saw a way to turn a penny out of his misfortunes.

" 'I won't name the day,' he answered, 'because, as you say, that might get on your conscience. I won't name the day to you—any more than that lying baggage, Susan Westaway, as she now is, would name the day to me; but this I can do. If you offer me enough money, I'll tell you to within a week when the thing shall be done.'

" Charles thought upon that. He had saved up five pound in the course of ten year or thereabouts, and 'twas in the Post Office Savings Bank, at his mercy to draw out if so he wished. He little liked to part from a penny of it, for they'd told him that was gathering in money at interest, and he'd got a sort of foggy idea 'twould goody into a hundred for him if he lived long enough.

" 'I'll give 'e ten bob to know the date within a week, Tobias,' he says; but his friend didn't think 'twas sufficient.

" 'Make it twenty, and we'll talk about it,' he answered.

" Charlie tried for fifteen, but the dying man, as he called himself, was firm; and a few days later Bates brought Tobias a sovereign, and Toby told him that he might expect to hear the tragical news just after the August Bank Holiday. So they left it there, and the next thing Brimblecombe got was a message from old Gammer Grimbald at Princetown—a bed-ridden creature, who preserved great faith and patience under her sufferings. She sent for Tobias, and he went, and she earnestly begged him to repent of his intention, but said, if he wasn't going to repent, that he might do her a service. And he asked her what 'twas, and she told him she much wanted a message took to her soldier son—him as fell into the sea and was drowned when he was drunk at Plymouth ten year afore.

" 'You'll be going to the same place as him, Toby,' said

poor Mrs. Grimal, 'and there you and the likes of you will have to work out your salvation with fear and trembling; and for my dear son's sake I'd much wish you to carry a message to him, to cheer him and lift his thoughts to the love of the watching Lord, Who forgets none, saint and sinner alike. I want you to take him glad tidings of hope from his old mother; and if you consent to do it, I'll give you two sovereigns that you can leave to your friends in your will.'

"A queer sort of offer, and it shows how a good mother never forgets her childer, and stretches out her hand to them and her heart likewise, even though they may be sadly gone before into the darkness of doubt.

"Toby felt terrible pleased, and promised to carry the mother's words, and took her money. He didn't make a will, however, because he very well knowed there would be nothing to leave under it; but he made away with the two pounds, and he made away with Charlie's one, and he let hisself go pretty reckless, and spent the cash on liquor and got into bad company, all within a fortnight of time. In fact, Mr. Hannaford very near saved him the trouble of giving notice, for he was much tempted to sack the man owing to his riotous living. So August Bank Holiday came and went, and there was Tobias more alive than ever he'd been afore, you might say, while in secret both Bates and Gammer Grimal began to tremble for their money.

"Half-way through August, Charlie reckoned 'twas about time to make inquiries. His work was running short with Farmer Maydew, and he began to feel most strongly that Tobias ought to go, or else give back the cash he'd had. And about the same time Gammer Grimal sent a message to Brimblecombe that she'd very much like to have a bit of a talk with him at his convenience. You see, poor thing, she was cut in half between the thought of

getting a straight message to her dead boy and the sad idea of how 'twould have to reach him. And though glad that Tobias had changed his mind and meant, as she hoped, to justify his existence afore it ended in a natural manner, yet she felt, if he did that, in common justice her two pound did ought to be returned.

“ However, she had to whistle for it, because his trouble had made Brimblecombe a hard-hearted and lawless sort of fool, as happens with some natures. He'd been hit heavy, and he didn't care a button who 'twas he hit back, even though it might be an old bed-ridden woman. Such was his fall. So he didn't pay no heed to Mrs. Grimal's message, and never went near her, and still carried on in a very rash sort of way. But he couldn't escape from Bates. In fact, Charlie was at him morning, noon, and night. He caught Tobias one evening coming back from work, and, being angered by now for his money, talked straight about it. Indeed, they had some pretty fiery words on the subject.

“ ‘ I'm tired of this,’ says Charlie. ‘ Here's September in sight a'most, and nothing done. A bargain's a bargain, Tobias Brimblecombe, and if you ban't going to give Mr. Hannaford notice, then you can give me back my money, and the sooner you do, the better pleased I shall be about it.’

“ ‘ You ought to blush for yourself,’ answered Toby, ‘ a cruel, heartless devil that you are ! You'd hound me out of the world and dance on my grave, no doubt ! 'Tis shameful to think that a human being can desire another's death like you want mine. And you call yourself a Christian man ! ’

“ ‘ Not at all—not at all,’ replied t'other. ‘ All I say is, a bargain's a bargain, and I'm sick of your dishonest ways. Every time I meet you and ax you when 'tis to be, you make some paltry excuse.’

“ ‘You'd hurry me out of life,’ cried Brimblecombe again, ‘and such as you ought to be put away yourselves! ’Tis a sin and a scandal to do it, and me with an old mother and everything! But you needn't fear, Charles; I'm going in my good time. I don't want to live; ’tis only for the sake of others that I hang on. I shall be off presently—afore pheasant shooting begins, without a doubt.’

“ ‘A bargain's a bargain,’ whined Charlie again. ‘You said ’twas to be after August Bank Holiday when I gave you my money, and now ’tish't to be carried out till October. You'm a very unsporting sort of man, and what becomes of me in the meantime? Here be I out of work on September the third, and ready for your job. ’Twas a clear understanding, surely? You got my money under false pretences, Tobias, and that puts you in reach of the law; and if you don't give it back, I'll tell policeman about you.’

“ They wrangled a bit more, and Toby said that a policeman was very small potatoes in the eye of a man who would be standing afore the Recording Angel afore pheasant shooting. Then he asked Charlie for another ten bob to hurry him up; and Charles properly lost his temper at that, and said as Brimblecombe was adding insult to injury and must take him for a born fool—which, of course, was what Tobias and everybody else did do.

“ However, he wouldn't drop no more money, and the men parted, to meet again under very strange circumstances a fortnight later, when the end of the tale came to be told.

During that time Toby let himself go to the dogs, and disgraced himself to Tavistock Market, and got the sack for good and all. Hannaford warned him against his evil ways, gave him his money, and bade him begone. So there he was, and he thought to make capital out of it with Bates, and went straight off to Sampford Spiney, where Bates lived to, and asked for the man. The first of September, it chanced

to be, and he heard that Charlie was out on the Moor, along with his master, snipe shooting. He walked out according, because he thought to have a tell with Charles behind his master's back; but then, in the dimpsy of the evening, who should he see but Bates coming back through Walla Valley by himself? Charles carried a game bag and a gun, and he explained that Mr. Maydew had met a friend and was going home another way.

“ ‘Tis my last day with him,’ said Bates, ‘and to-morrow I be loose on the world, and all your fault.’

“ ‘Pitch upon this stone,’ answers Toby, ‘and we’ll have a tell. A proper gun, sure enough.’

“ He fingered Mr. Maydew’s fowling-piece a minute. Then a very wicked thought come in his head, and he acted according.

“ ‘Tis all over, Charles,’ he began. ‘My thread’s spun, and I shall be a dead man out of mind afore you go to church next Sunday. I give Hannaford notice to-night, and if you travel up over to-morrow forenoon, I’ve no doubt he’ll be very glad for to see you and take you on at my money.’

“ Bates could hardly believe his ears or his luck at that, and he got very excited and friendly about it.

“ ‘I always knowed you was a man of your word, and straight, and to be relied upon,’ he said. ‘When a chap here and there laughed, and told me I’d done a foolish thing, I held out that you’d keep your promise, and that I was safe to trust you.’

“ ‘Certainly, certainly,’ answers Toby. ‘It’s all over, and the better the day the better the deed, as they say. You’ll be in good work again afore you know it, and Hannaford can be trusted. I’ve thought it all out very careful, and I’ve weighed drowning against hanging, and poison against shooting. ’Tis to be shooting, Charles. I was going

to borrow old 'Moleskin's' gun to-morrow, but you've saved me the trouble, because this one in my hand will do very well. 'Tis loaded, I see.'

"Well, there's no doubt Bates felt fearful then, but he didn't feel so fearful as you might think. He knowed what a slippery customer Brimblecombe was got to be, and it come to him very forcible that he'd better strike while the iron was hot, and not strain his conscience to breaking at such a moment. 'A bargain's a bargain,' he kept saying to himself; and that supported him through the ordeal.

"'If you will, you will, Tobias,' he answered; 'but I hope you don't think none the worse of me, or blame me in the matter.'

"'Not at all,' declared Toby. 'Why should I? You can't prevent what I'm going to do. Nothing can—'tis all over bar shouting. And if you wouldn't let me have this gun, I should only go to 'Moleskin,' the poacher, and borrow his. So what you have got to say is this: You meet me and have a tell, and I admire this here fowler's gun, and say 'tis the best I've ever seen. Then I say I'd dearly like to pull trigger, and you forbid it. But, as the stronger man, I override you, and tell you to bide where you be while I go up over the river through yonder bottom and try for a rabbit. You can't stop me, and I go. Then you hear the gun fire, after waiting twenty minutes or thereabout, and then you expect me to come back again. You sit on very patient till the darkness comes down, but then you get uneasy and set off to seek me. And then you find my mortal dust all scat to atoms—a terrible gashly sight—and then you run home for dear life and blaze it abroad, so as all the people shall hear I be gone at last!'

"Charles shook in his shoon at that. 'I shall never have the courage to do it,' he said. But Toby laughed at him. 'You silly mumphead,' he answered, 'what courage

do you need to give the alarm about it? Why, if you be frightened to see a dead corpse, you needn't come across the river at all. You can just wait till you hear the shot, then you'll know I be gone, and you can run off and say you've seen me a dead 'un. Under yonder tree—the tall one with they hollies next to it—you'll find me stretched out. And now I'll wish you good-bye. And if you mean well to me, Charles, you can go up over to-night and break it to my poor dear mother.'

“Bates was much relieved that he needn't see Toby's carcase, and he promised faithful that he'd let Mother Brimblecombe know that very night, so soon as ever her son was gone.

“So Tobias shook Charles's hand and went off, and the other was thrown into a terrible state of fear and distress. But he let the man go to his doom, and presently he sat humped up on a stone by the water, listening, half in hope and half in fear, for the fatal sound. At last it came with a bang, and Bates felt as if the shot had gone through his own head. And then he felt as if he was a murderer and had slain t'other with his own hand. 'Twas some minutes afore he could move, for the sound of gunfire had glued his limbs to the rock on which he squatted; but at last he wrenched himself up and rushed away to Sampford Spiney, and cried out the fatal news how Toby Brimblecombe had fallen in with him and borrowed Mr. Maydew's gun to shoot a rabbit, and turned it on himself and done the fearful deed he'd threatened.

“‘Where be my gun, anyway?’ asks Farmer Maydew when he come to hear of it, for that was all that interested him.

“And Charles he says: ‘The gun be fallen alongside the carcase, and I didn't dare to touch un for fear of breaking the law.’

“ You'll guess the sequel, I dare say. The gun was worth thirty-five pound, and Tobias he got twenty-five by it. They traced him to Plymouth, and found the gunsmith that bought the gun. But no more was seen of Brimblecombe, and though the people believed his mother knew all about him, she never would allow it, and vowed most steadfast that she did not.

“ 'Tis a curious story of how trouble found the fighting power in a feeble man and made him show himself. Unfortunately, what he had to show weren't much good to the community, and it would have been far better if trouble had never over-got the chap and led him into bad courses.”

THE FUR-LINED COAT

THE FUR-LINED COAT

THE wind was shouting in the chimney like a drunken man, and the rain coming down in sheets o' water. A proper fierce March night, in fact—winter dying hard, and scarce a sign of spring save where the blade was green in the fields, and the rooks terrible busy about their nests.

So bad was the night that not many had got to 'The Plume'; but I was there in my usual corner, because the elements be nought to me, and Butt was also there, and Peter Gurney, the farrier. Sam Bonus looked in for a dram, on his way back from Bovey, but he didn't bide, being wet home to the skin; and Peter, he was soon gone, too, so that left only me—Tom Turtle—and Moses Butt, in one of his most silent moods; and, of course, Johnny Rowland behind the bar.

Never did I know a quieter evening in company, though 'twas noisy enough outside, and I began to fear us weren't to have much fun nor change of ideas, when the door was opened, and who should come in but old Uncle Tom Cobleigh! The ancient man was blown through the ope-way like a leaf out of the tempest, and there he stood, smiling and gay and light-hearted as ever, wi' his face so red as a rose, and the water dripping off the hard brim of his old top-hat.

"My stars, Uncle!" cries Rowland. "What the mischief be you doing out 'pon such a night as this? You'll

catch your death one of these days if you ban't more careful ! ”

“ And you eighty-five, if you're an hour, Uncle ! ” I said. “ 'Tis running in the face of Providence, and a most dangerous thing. ”

Butt spoke not, but he shifted from the nook nighest the fire, and let Uncle dry hisself. The old man threw off his ‘ Spencer ’ coat, and Rowland sent it in the kitchen to be wiped and dried for him ; then his beaver was hung afore the fire, where it quickly sent up a column of steam, and he put his withered legs to the blaze, and fetched out his pipe and had a good drop of hot spirits and water. He was soon crowing and happy as a bird.

“ I couldn't bide home, ” he said. “ I'm a restless old blade at best, and what with quarter day so near again, and my grandson got to go in hospital, and the elections for Parliament coming on, and one thing and another, I felt I must have a bit of company to-night, weather or no weather. And, by good chance, I find you here, Moses, so you can see me home. I'm such a light weight and so gone in the hams, along of my great age, that this here tearing wind do send me across the road all ends up, like a sparrow. ”

Uncle was in great form, and laughed at our fears for him.

“ My generation be hard as oaks, ” he said, “ and we live and die same as them. I may see three figures so like as not, for when a man weathers three score and ten, and be sweet as a nut still, and sound at the kernel, then there's nought he can't stand against but old age. Diseases pass me by like water running down the river. I'm seasoned against all mortal ills, and nought will put me down but Time. ”

“ You was harder brought up than us men of a later

generation," I said. "Though I can call to mind barley bread myself—a thing the people to-day would pull a mighty long face at."

"'Twas all that ever I got to eat till near half a century old," declared Uncle Cobleigh. "My faither had eight childer, and worked fifteen years for seven shillings and sixpence a week. For Matthew Reddiciffe did he work—him as had Walna Farm in the old days—a man as came down in the world a good bit before his end."

"I mind his sons," said Johnny Rowland. "Three sons he had, and one's still living."

"That was the man, and me and my brothers and sisters was all born in a house at Walna. 'House,' I call it, but you wouldn't stable your hoss in such a cabin nowadays. Barley bread and barley dumplings, and barley broth wi' a tater in it sometimes for a feast day. Wheat? Wheat was two pound a bushel then; but the farmer's man got his barley for ten shilling a bushel. They was talking of the cannon balls in the Boer War back at my neighbours t'other evening, and I said 'Cannon balls?' I said. 'Tis a cruel pity,' I said, 'as when us went to war wi' they Boers that Lord Buller didn't take out a brave lot of our barley dumplings, for they'd slay a man and scat him to shivers at a mile, so hard was they!' But teeth was ivory in them days, and us boys could chew up barley dumplings and get the good of 'em, though I doubt if the childer as be born now could stand 'em. We'm getting that soft of late years that we shall soon think barley ban't good enough for our pigs, let alone our boys and girls."

"And the cider in them days was more like vinegar than apple juice," said Rowland. "But now the young youths cry out for it to be sweet. 'Tis a sign of the times. The labourers drink tea harvesting now."

"Tea! God bless 'e!" cried Uncle. "Why, in my time,

tea was so dear as baccy. Fourpence an ounce we had to pay, and, of course, at that fearsome price, 'twas only a thing for weddings and funerals. Organy tea was all us ever had, and then only if us was ill and wanted a bit of care."

"To think of how the world have changed!" I said. "Why, you can buy tea at fivpence a quarter of a pound, and 'tis tea as you can swear to—quite a lot of taste to it."

"Ess," continued Uncle. "I began life when I was seven year old, frighting rooks and driving bullocks. At ten I went to regular service, and I only left Farmer Coole, over to Honeybag Tor, three years agone. That's seventy-eight year I worked out of eighty-five all told!"

"The people did ought to hear about it, Uncle," said Butt. "In my opinion, us ought to take up a collection for 'e. I dare say we might get together ten sovereigns by it, at the least."

"I should be terrible pleased if it happened," said Uncle, because there weren't any false pride about him. "But it isn't likely to. In fact, us ancient blids ban't wanted now. I'm sure there's a good few in this place as be jealous of my years, and think I'm having too much luck to live so long, let alone a subscription."

We told him he was much mistaken, because us all felt very proud of the aged man; and then Butt spoke again.

"I mind when David Reddcliffe died," he said—"that was one of Farmer Reddcliffe's sons. Three sons he had, and the eldest was called Weston, and the second was Andrew, and the third was David. And David was a gentle, kindly creature, but the others were hard, own-self men, like their father. And Andrew still lives, but t'others be gone a good while."

He stopped, and Rowland spoke.

"I can tell 'e a fine story about them three men," he said.

“ ’Twill do you good to tell it,” I answered, “ and be an excuse for taking a drop of rum and honey, which you be fond of.”

So Johnny mixed hisself a brew and began.

“ When Matthew Reddicliffe died, ’twas found he hadn’t left a will. He’d gone down the hill a good bit in his old age, after leaving Walna Farm, and he spent his money on himself ; but ’twas always supposed that he meant to leave his goods—what was left of ’em—to his son David. T’others he hated, and they hadn’t no use for him ; but David was tender to the last with the old man, and I’ve no doubt that Matthew meant to make a will, and he may even have thought he had done so, for he was silly and tootlish, and lost his memory towards the end. However, when his youngest son had closed his eyes, and things were looked into, ’twas found that the old chap had just lived very clever to the limit of his resources, and died after he’d used up the last shot in the locker. And ’twas also found that he hadn’t left no will, after all.

“ Then, when that got to be knowed, his other sons was down on the cottage like a pair of kris-hawks, and Weston, the eldest, gave out as everything was his. But Andrew, the second one—him that’s still living—he wouldn’t stand that ; and David had his say, too. So, finally, after a lot of snapping and snarling on the part of Andrew and Weston, the brothers decided as they’d draw lots for the furniture and effects. Of course, there wasn’t anything like what old Matthew had had in his palmy days, for, after his wife died, he’d sold all the best of his goods, and latterly was content to live in a small cottage to Widecombe, with a woman to come in daily and do the chores and cook his bit of food, and his son David to look after him.

“ There was a scandal or two over his sticks, poor though they were, and I heard how one night, on the quiet, two

days before the lot-drawing, Andrew Reddicliffe came to the empty cottage with his handbag, just to pick over a few spoons and forks and suchlike unbeknown to his brothers. He thought, you see, to smuggle off the best of the stuff on the quiet ; but Weston Reddicliffe was built on the same pattern, and just as Andrew sneaked up to the door in the moonlight, bag in hand, who should he see climbing out of the side window but his brother ! And Weston had a pretty full bag, too.

“ I’d have give a Bank Holiday’s takings to hear the row between them two knaves, but I got some of it afterwards from Andrew’s missis. ’Twas a thief set to catch a thief, and neither could come it over the other. ‘ What be you up to, then ? ’ cries out Andrew. And Weston faces him and says : ‘ Much the same as you, by the look of it, and first come first served in a matter of this sort.’ But Andrew wouldn’t have that, you may be sure. He was the bigger and the stronger man, and though Weston offered him share and share, his dander rose up at the game t’other had tried to play, and he made Weston turn out his bag and put everything back where he’d took it from. The language was crooked and various, I’ll warrant ; and then they seed each other off the premises, for they only feared themselves, because David Reddicliffe, though poor as a coot, was a different sort of chap, and straight in all his dealings.

“ Afore the lot-drawing, them fine fellows was in and out of the house at all hours, watching each other ; and then Weston had a bit of luck, and got in twenty minutes all alone. ’Twas on that occasion he come across his father’s fur-lined coat, and stared with great amazement, no doubt because, though he knew the dead man had been spending his money on himself very free and easy towards the end, he never dreamed as the old chap would so far forget his

station and means as to go and buy a masterpiece of a coat like this. 'Twas of good stout cloth, reaching to the knee, and 'twas lined with bright fur, deep and thick and so red as a squirrel. The fur turned back over the collar and cuffs, and made a terrible fine appearance. 'Twas a regular gentleman's coat, in fact—about the last thing old Matthew had invested in—thinking, no doubt that such an amazing garment would keep life in his body for another winter at least. But he never had a chance to try, for the coat was flame-new, and had not been worn by mortal man. And Weston reckoned that if he couldn't come by it and keep it unbeknownst to his brothers, he was a bigger fool than he thought himself. His mind was whetted to move pretty quick, and he hatched his plot on the instant. He couldn't take the treasure away, because he was as like as not to meet Andrew in the street, so he just fetched out the coat from the cupboard where he found it, and slipped it into the worst piece of furniture in the house—an old, tumble-down chest o' drawers, not worth more'n five shilling for firewood. And when his brothers arrived to arrange about the lot-drawing and put down all the things, Weston, he said casual like, that he'd take the old chest of drawers, because, though quite worthless, 'twould be useful to his wife for the servant's bedroom; and he proposed that Andrew and David should each choose a trifle afore the draw to make up for it. And as Andrew had been through the old chest the day before, he didn't suspect; and, of course, David didn't suspect neither, not being that sort of man.

“And then they went through everything, down to the dead man's pattens and tobacco-pipes and his set of false teeth. The lots was all most carefully marked out and divided up as small as could be, so that all should have a chance; but old Matthew's spoons and forks—a dozen and a half, and several silver—went in one lot, and his

watch and seals went in one lot, and, of course, things like his 'grandfather' clock and famous copper warming-pan and old oak corn-bin, said to be worth five pounds, and such-like, was all in separate lots. The jimcracks and joanies—chimney ornaments and such-like—was of little worth, and not a few were broke at that, so they were all lumped in together; and a pair of very brave candlesticks, with cut-glass droppers round 'em, had been the joy of Mrs. Reddcliffe's life, and they was thought by the two brothers to be worth a pound to anybody. So they went in a separate lot.

"The night afore the draw, Weston Reddcliffe looked in at the constabulary office and said: 'I'll be glad, Mr. Inspector, if you'll keep your eye on my late father's cottage till to-morrow, because, though not wishful to say anything against anybody, yet there's strong temptations around, and 'twill be better if you take special charge of the place for fear of accidents.' And the policeman, he said: 'Funny you should come about this, Mr. Reddcliffe, because your brother, Mr. Andrew, he's been at me a'ready on the same errand. You need have no fear,' he said, 'for I've told one of my chaps 'pon that beat to pay special attention to your father's cottage, and see as no harm overtakes it. And 'tis a pity, I'm sure,' adds the policeman, who was a superior man, and didn't care a button for either of the rogues—'tis a pity, I'm sure, that you didn't skin your father afore you buried him! He was old and tough, and might have stood you in ten bob at the tanner's!'

"But Weston turned wroth at this, and threatened to report the man, and went his way with all his heckles up.

"Then came the hour of the draw, and that poor jolter-head of a David would very like have been kindiddled out of his rights altogether by 'em; but his wife was just the woman for a party like that, and he knew it, and he begged

as she'd kindly come to the drawing. And she said: 'Did you think I was going to let you go and be choused by them two hungry tigers all by yourself? You ought to know me better.'

"So she went along with David, and his brothers, very well knowing her ways, and that she could see through a brick wall further than most men, let alone women, weren't none too pleased to find her come. They grumbled a bit, and pointed out as they hadn't brought their wives, whereupon David's woman axed 'em point-blank what was the objection to her watching the lottery; and, under the glint of her eyes they was silent, and couldn't find no honest answer. ' 'Twas the cleverest thing ever that mumphead, David, did when he got you,' says Andrew savage-like under his breath to her. And she answered out loud: 'Sorry as I can't return the compliment, Andrew Reddicliffe, for your Mary ban't exactly the pride and joy of your heart, by all accounts, and we all know that she have often wished her cake was dough again.'

"Then the drawing began, and, by Gor! it must have been a sight for sore eyes. Because that jolterhead of a David couldn't make a mistake, and pretty near every time he took a dip, he fetched out something worth having, whereas t'others couldn't do right. And Mrs. David sat alongside of the hat they drawed from, calm as a judge, and she took her husband's lots from his hand and wouldn't give 'em up no more.

"'Guy Fawkes and angels!' shouts Weston, after David had got the copper warming-pan and the grandfather clock in two successive draws, 'the Dowl's in this! Here, give me the hat!' And he took it and gived it a good rake round and a fierce shake. And one piece of paper hopped out, and Weston put his foot on it like lightning. But Mrs. David had seen, and called his attention to it.

“ ‘There’s a lot jumped out and got under your foot, Weston Reddicliffe,’ she said ; and he swore ’twasn’t so, but had to move his boot, and there ’twas. He cussed proper when it turned out to be the candlesticks with the crystal droppers ; but, of course, the lot went back in the hat. Then Andrew, he drew a cargo of old tobacco-tins and mouse-traps and rubbish like that, and Weston, he got a meat-safe with one side out, and a worm-eaten chair, all covered with grease where his father’s head did used to rub it. And David went gaily on, and drew the oak corn-bin and a new table-cloth, and a very fine stuffed cock-pheasant in a glass case.

“ For a bit the luck turned after that, and t’others did better. Weston got a tester bed with hangings, and Andrew drew six new runner towels and an old gun worth fifteen shillings, while David drew some of his father’s boots and linen that was good for nought ; but the vases was still left, and a ring what had belonged to the dead man’s wife. ’Twas thought he’d sold it, but it turned up with some other trinkrums not worth anything. But the ring had a proper precious stone in it, of a pale forget-me-not colour, called a turkwise, and watchmaker Nelson had seen it and offered twelve shilling for it ; and knowing watchmaker Nelson, the brothers didn’t doubt but what the ring was worth gold.

“ ’Twas then, by an unlucky accident, as it looked, that a neighbour ran in with bad news for Mrs. David. She never had but one little boy, and the woman from next door called in haste to say there was a sad yowling coming from the cottage of the David Reddicliffes, where the boy of eight year old had been left alone.

“ ‘It sounds as if he’d cut hissself or falled in the fire,’ said the breathless woman, ‘and I couldn’t get in ’cause you’d locked up.’ Then, of course, Mrs. David went away

so quick as she was able, and her husband ran to the door with her.

“ ‘ You go back,’ she said. ‘ Quick—quick, or them hookem snivey rogues will get the vases and the ring while your back be turned ! I lay the child’s all right, and if he’s all wrong, you can’t do no good by coming with me.’

“ So off she ran, with the lots that had been drawed by David in her pocket ; and she found her young hopeful had cut his finger to the bone, but weren’t much the worse ; and David, he went back to the drawing.

“ But during the few moments his back was turned, his brothers hadn’t been idle. You see, they felt that Fate had hit ’em hard enough, and they saw no harm in being upsides with David, so far as possible, over the remaining lots. There was but half a dozen or so left, and they nipped out the ring and the vases with crystal droppers, and each took one. Then, when all was over, David wondered where the treasures was got to ; and Weston, he says : ‘ Why, my dear man, I drawed the ring an hour ago ! ’ And Andrew said : ‘ And I drawed the vases just after they tumbled out of my hat, and your wife put ’em back ! ’

“ So there ’twas ; and David had to be content with the last lot, which was little more than a few mugs and some cracked chiney, as used to stand along the parlour mantel-shelf.

“ There ended the drawing, but the adventures weren’t over for Weston, nor yet for David. The youngest son’s good luck held to him ; and though his brothers had palmed off the old crocks on him, and kept the ring and the vases for themselves, it turned out the ring weren’t worth but a few shilling more than Nelson offered ; so Mrs. Weston kept that, and lost it a week after, on washing-day. And as for the vases, for all their glitter and glory, the bitter truth about them was that they weren’t worth a shilling apiece.

In fact, you might say they chaps had broke the Eighth Commandment for nought. And then a visitor to Widecombe called in on Mrs. David for a bottle of lemonade, which she sold and advertised on a board to catch thirsty travellers. The gentleman proved to be well skilled in cloam, and he actually offered her five-and-thirty shillings for a blue teapot with a chip out of the spout. Of course, 'twas one of the things David had got in the lottery that his brothers had fobbed off on him. And Mrs. David didn't haggle, as a common sort of woman might have done, but took the man's money on the instant and handed over the teapot in a bit of brown paper afore he'd time to change his mind.

“ And as for Weston and the coat, that tale wasn't all told, neither ; for, next to getting the coat, he had to think upon how to get its value. Of course, he couldn't say nothing about it in public, and his inclination made him want to sell, and his pride made him want to wear. And his pride won the day ; so, a little after, when the first snow fell, out came Weston Reddicliffe in the coat, to the wonderment of all men. He passed it off lightly, and said as his wife had made him buy it to take care of himself in the winter months. And some simple people believed him, and wondered how he'd got to be so rich all of a sudden ; and the greater number didn't believe him, and puzzled to know how he'd come by such a fine garment, anyway. But Providence have a trick of getting back its own sooner or late, and now a funny thing happened.

“ There come to Widecombe a letter for Mr. Matthew Reddicliffe, and postman, knowing that David was the man to look after his father's affairs, took it to him. He opened it, and found 'twas a bill for seven pound ten shillings—the price of a fur-lined coat as the old man had bought down to Newton Abbot a month afore he died.

“ ‘ My stars ! ’ says David to his lady, all in a mizmaze. ‘ Whatever do you make of this, my dear ? ’

“ They say ’tis the only time that Mrs. David was ever heard to laugh out loud in her life. But laugh she did.

“ ‘ You can put that in the letter-box where your fine brother Weston lives,’ she said. ‘ You needn’t worry about it. ’Tis a stickle path the rogue goes on, and we’ll live to see him at the bottom yet. He stole thicky coat, and now, thank God, he’ve got to screw out seven pound ten from somewheres, and I’d give a year off my life to hear him talking about it ! ’

“ But she didn’t hear him, and more didn’t anybody else, excepting his wife, who tried to keep the secret. He got the bill, and, what’s more, he paid. ’Twas a choice between that and being took to the county court ; and, even so, he had to face the people, for though David never said nothing, for the honour of the family, Mrs. David hadn’t no feeling on that score, and she gave the ugly truth a pretty good send-off, I believe.

“ ’Twas one of those cases where vartue was rewarded, and wickedness punished on the spot—a most unusual thing to hap in real life.”

THE HEADSTONE OF THE CORNER

THE HEADSTONE OF THE CORNER

THERE came a good rally of neighbours to 'The Plume' one Saturday night when the snow was on the ground. A cruel winter we was having, and hunger, like an armed man, had broke into many a house. By middle of February the heath ponies were down in the valleys, and they had to fight for a living even there; but up 'pon the Moors 'twas death for all created things to be abroad. Blizzard followed blizzard, and not till May was far spent did the snows melt from the northern faces of the hills.

That night at the inn, owing to an accident, the talk slipped back to old times and the things that our fathers had told us. But 'twas a matter of yesterday that started it. Samuel Bonus happed to be vicar's churchwarden, and he mentioned how, the day before, he'd found three men asleep in the church porch. Tramps all, and they'd got in there out of the weather; and Sam reckoned that if he hadn't found 'em there—going after dark to hang a notice against the wall—that they'd have died afore morning, because it was twenty degrees of frost at the least, and the poor devils hadn't enough clothes to make a decent suit among 'em.

And that reminded old Harry Hawke, one of our widowmen, touching a thing that fell out long afore.

"'Twas in the Reverend Valletort's time," said Harry, "and my grandfather was his churchwarden, same as Bonus here be our vicar's now. But the Reverend Valletort was one of them very gentle, trusting men—more

angel than man, you might say. Goodness beamed out of his face, so saintly of countenance was he ; and I've heard my grandfather say that if his holy surplice had turned into wings, and he'd flown off on 'em through the church window to heaven, not a soul would have felt any great astonishment about it. Too much faith, however, could be proved against him. He wasn't stern enough with the evil-doer, and to the last he spoke a thought doubtfully about eternal punishment. The gentle heart of the man rebelled against the burning lake, and he was far too hopeful. And that's as dangerous as t'other thing. Us don't want the pit of darkness rammed down our throats in every sermon, but 'tisn't right to shirk it and forget there is such a place. And sometimes the Reverend Valletort got a sharp reminder that the Evil One's still loose and busy as a bee, and finds plenty of time to have a look at Dartymoor also, on his wicked way to and from the towns. As your old father used to say, Gregory Snow : ' The Dowl be cruel busy at Plymouth half his time, and 'tis clear enough he comes and goes by way of Dartymoor.' And the best startler as Parson Valletort ever got was from my grandfather. Tramps used to sleep a lot in the church at that time, because the reverend would leave it open always ; and one fine morning old Daniel Hawke hasted to the vicarage and cried to see parson, and told him how a man had very clearly spent a good bit of the night in the Squire's pew. The vicar smiled, and like the good angel he was, said to grandfather :

“ ‘ Why for not, Mr. Hawke ? Could the poor fellow do better than sleep in his Father's house ? ’

“ ‘ Perhaps not, your reverence, ’ says the churchwarden ; ‘ but 'twill pain you to know the poor fellow's took his Father's candlesticks and drunk the holy wine to the last drop ! ’

“The candlesticks, you see, was solid silver, and put there as a momentum in honour of Squire Bassett’s dead lady; and when Squire came to hear about it, he drove over to see parson, and hit out pretty straight from the shoulder. Be it as ’twill, the church was locked up after that, and no doubt the Reverend Valletort took a sadder and a truer view of what homeless and hungry human nature can sink to.”

Then Johnny Rowland was minded of another tale about a parson that followed the Reverend Valletort, two generations after—a different sort of man and made of harder stuff. Yet he was a great and a grand man, and a pillar of the Church and State, and justice was the very blood in his veins, you might say. Not that he came into the tale till very near the end of it, for most of Johnny’s story belonged to a very humble old chap by the name of Dicker.

“Samuel Dicker, the man was called,” began Rowland, “and my brother George married his sister Ann. He lived in George’s house, and was a bachelor of peaceful ways most times. But he had his habits, like the best and worst of us; and some of ’em was a thought troublesome without a doubt. Yet such was the nature of the man that, despite his little vagaries, one forgave him. You couldn’t quarrel with him more’n you could quarrel with a sheep.

“None ever called him Dicker, nor yet Samuel. He went by the name of ‘Hay-Corn-Roots,’ because they was his only subjects on earth, and none could ever get him off them. He knowed nothing in the world else; but, to make up for that, what he didn’t know about the great crops wasn’t worth knowing. He had an eye for such things, and could tell the future about ’em in a very wonderful way; and ’twas his joy and pleasure to give his advice free gratis. And of a holiday the man would spend all his time wandering over the land, now mourning over the hay or gloating over it,

according to the promise, now busy with the wheat and barley, and now, in the fall of the year, all for swedes or mangel, as the case might be. He'd go and sit by a tidy crop of oats like another man would go and sit by his sweetheart, or at the pub, and he'd get as much joy from the growing things as either of them. And the amazing queer fact about him was that he didn't own a rod of land hisself, and didn't want to. He worked up to Stoke Farm, above Holne Valley, and Uriah Hamlyn, the master of it, taking to Dicker, because he was a bachelor like himself, offered him a nice corner of land for his own use if he pleased, because he said that such a man ought to be rewarded. But Hay-Corn-Roots wouldn't take it.

“ ‘Don't want nothing for my own,’ he said. ‘ ’Twould spoil the general interest I feel in the crops year in, year out. ’Twould make me one-sided and selfish, and I couldn't look out with a single heart on the ways of Nature and the Lord no more. I should get that wrapped up in my own patch that I should want to pray for my own fashion of weather, and grow selfish and small-minded.’ So he didn't have it, though he was a tower of strength to Hamlyn, and put many a pound in his master's pocket by his great cleverness.

“ He worked hard, but never had nought to do along with the things.¹ ’Twas always the fruits of the field with him. To see that man sowing in the old-fashioned way, with the seedlip under his arm, and his grain flying in a steady shower over the ploughed earth, was a very fine sight. A glutton for work, and a glutton for cider when he worked. My brother asked him once what he loved best to do, and he thought a good bit and decided 'twas pulling mangels. Certainly he had a clever hand at that, and could fetch

¹ *Things.* Sheep and cattle.

the great orange-yellow turnips out of the earth and give 'em a twirl, and drop the leaves o' one side and the roots t'other neater and quicker than many men half his age.

“ He was terrible hopeful, for an old chap—the sort that picks over a rubbish heap and sets up for an ironmonger. He reckoned he was worth all his wages and a bit more ; and about every three or four years he called out to have his money lifted ; and Hamlyn always fell in with the idea, well knowing the justice of it. But lifting Dicker's wages had a black side, because the man was so built that before a bit of luck his reasoning parts failed him, and so sure as his money went up, he was missing for a few days. On the bust he went, for sheer joy at getting a rise in the world. That was his nature, you see, and great excitement always made him run to the bottle. Once, afore Hamlyn rose him a shilling a week, he made Samuel sign the pledge, which he did do willingly and thankfully ; but he went down again like a straw before the wind, so soon as he'd drawn his money, and neither my wife nor me ever saw the colour of that extra bob, though he'd lodged with us three year then, and we felt quite as much entitled to a bit of a rise as him. 'Twas only success made the man drink. Trouble always kept him straight ; and such was his build of mind that other people's troubles often hit him quite as hard as his own, and made him sad company ; and, taking him all round, George doubted that was the most wonderful thing about the man. He was a tower of strength at a hard pinch, but quickly got above himself if things went well. He would face trouble with the wisest, and only let himself go before prosperity. Not like a good few, as run to drink when the world's crooked and they can't get their own way.

“ Samuel Dicker was a yellowish-coloured man, with ginger hair and ginger whiskers and ginger eyebrows.

He had very small eyes, sharp as needles, and a very large easy mouth, with a set of false teeth, as he'd picked up cheap at a sale, and was terrible proud of, because they matched his hair. They'd belonged to old Farmer Foote down to Buckfast, and was near as good as new; and the widow never forgave the auctioneer for letting 'em go for three shilling and sixpence, though the man couldn't do no better, because nobody bid for 'em except my brother-in-law.

"Sammy didn't care much for human creatures, and wouldn't talk free on any subject but his own. My brother never seed him angry but once, and that was when a chap said that ensilage was good for milch cows, whereas the truth about it be that 'tis good for bullocks and calves, but must on no account be offered to cows, because it gives the milk a bad taste. And Dicker said that for a grown man, with an immortal soul in him, to be so cruel ignorant was a disgrace to the nation, and ought to be shown up. He took things serious like that, and he hated change; and he was a good bit cast down when his master, up to Stoke Farm, got reading about chemical manures and covering his land with some ghost-white, stinking stuff that you could smell ten mile away.

"'After sweat of man,' said Samuel, 'there's no manure like what comes from an honest stable; and this here poisonous beastliness will fork the roots and canker the corn and rot the hay without a doubt. And, for my part, I most wish I'd been took afore 'twas discovered, for it can't come to no good, and I'm terrible sorry that I be here to see it.'

"He was speaking to George at the time, and my brother tried to comfort him, and vowed as Hamlyn was a book-larned cuss, and not likely to spend his money on nitrates without good promise of return. But Dicker wouldn't hear that.

“ ‘The Goodger’s¹ in the stuff,’ he said, ‘and if the crops conquer against it, ’tis only to say that God A’mighty’s stronger than t’other. He can save us and only Him, and the whole business of this here vile muck be a plant, put up by they wheat-growing foreigners, I reckon, to spoil our corn and starve us and ruin our markets.’

“ He mourned a lot about it, and didn’t touch a drop of liquor for a fortnight.

“ You see, he was an unreasonable sort of old man in some ways, owing to narrowness and no power of reading. But sweet as an October apple he could be, and generally was, and a religious, church-going creature always. He took great truck in it, and seldom missed public praying twice of a Sunday.

“ Naturally, with his love of the fruits of the earth, he was wont to come out special strong to worship at the harvest festival, and he’d done his little best at that for more than a score of years. He dearly loved to see the church chock full of corn and vegetables, as the custom is, and many and many a time he lent a hand and added to the show with the best his master would let him have. ’Twas quite a little event in its way to see what Samuel would do for the church ; and now ’twas barley or oats, and now ’twas broccoli, or carrots, or what not. But he’d always manage a trophy of some kind, and the people often went just to see what he’d thought upon. And ’twas over the harvest festival that the man had the adventure of his life, you might say.

“ One day in mid-October George met him, wet with the showers of the mountains, in Bible phrase. He tramped down from Stoke in the rain, and under his arm was a pretty big parcel covered up with brown paper.

¹ *Goodger*. Devil.

“ ‘What hast there, Samuel?’ George axed, and he said: ‘Why, the corn-rick, to be sure!’ So then my brother knowed all about it. For three weeks he’d been busy as a bee of an evening to home, and while George smoked his pipe and read the paper, and Ann was after her chores or mending stockings, Dicker worked at a wonnerful little model cornstack, so natural as life, though of course not so large. Farmer Hamlyn had gived him the straw, and he piled it and trimmed it and thatched it, and set a row of mowsteads underneath of, it and planted it all on a piece of deal board, painted yellow like an arrish field. ’Twas a masterpiece, without any doubt, and Samuel himself, humble though the man was, couldn’t but admit that he’d done a clever thing.

“ ‘You’ll be taking it to the church for the harvest festival, no doubt,’ George said to him. ‘And, for that matter, I’ve nought to do for the minute, so I’ll go down along with you. But, afore we give it up, we’ll show it to Billy Cottle at the inn. He’s a great opinion of your cleverness all times, and a sight of this wonder ought to mean a free half pint, if nothing more.’

“ ‘I’m off drink for the moment, as you well know,’ answered Samuel; ‘but, all the same, us’ll show it to Cottle, since he’s an understanding man and knows a good thing when he sees it. And I’m hopeful, when us takes it down to Mr. Pipchin, as he’ll smile upon it and set it in the winder over Squire Blackall’s pew.’

“ ‘It did ought to go on the vamp-dish,’¹ said my brother, but Samuel Dicker’s modesty rose at that, and he wouldn’t allow it.

“ ‘No, no, ’tis far too holy a place for such a thing,’ he declared.

¹ *Vamp-dish*. Font.

“ Then they got down to the inn, and Billy Cottle, the landlord, was much pleased, and being a man with little religion, said that the cornstack was a darned sight too good for the church. In fact, he offered Sammy five shillings for it to put in the bar, but even that fancy money didn't tempt him.

“ ‘ I've had a hand in the harvest decorations for twenty-three year,' he said, ‘ and, please God, I shall for twenty-three more. Last year 'twas a barley-mow as I made, and the year afore that the sacred letters in corn upon a background of parsley ; and many such-like things I've done, but never nothing to equal this.’

“ ‘ The Reverend Champernowne will be very pleased, no doubt,' admitted Cottle, ‘ but, all the same, I'd sooner 'twas in my bar than in the church, and when all's said, more would see it in the long room here than there.’

“ But Samuel wouldn't budge, and so off they went to church, where the curate and a lot of women was busy at the decorations for next Sunday.

“ Mr. Pipchin, the young fellow was called—a poor tool, but well intending. He was a new-comer to our parish—fair as a rose, and he wore gold-rimmed glasses, and went in for being a very manly fellow when he first came to the parish. He wanted to get at the youths, and make 'em play games and keep out of the publics, and so on—all very well meant, but he wasn't the man for that sort of thing, and shone far brighter along with the mothers in the parish room than with their sons in the playing-field. And the boys saw through him, and called him ‘ Pip-pip ’ behind his back ; and Willy Saunders, of a Sunday night, when the folk gathered after service at Cottle's inn, did take off the reverend young fellow so ridiculous that they very near died of laughing.

“ Well, when George and Dicker got to the church, there

was quite a rally of folk buzzing about in a quiet but excited sort of way round Mr. Pipchin. He was the master of the scene, and he went tip-toeing about, issuing his orders and directing the helpers, while a lot of nice young, round-eyed, whispering girls from Miss Dolby's school ran every way to do his bidding. They was the foremost pupils, and allowed to take a hand with the harvest decorations and help the Reverend Pipchin for a treat. They fluttered about after him, and climbed ladders, and handed vegetables, and was all as hot and blushing and happy as need be. And the young man worked in the thick of them pleasant young women, and chattered and ordered 'em about, and felt their breath on his cheek, and saw the light in their eyes and the shape of their ankles, and, no doubt, thought, in his great innocence, that he was having a very dashing time. But he was human and prone to make favourites like all of us. George and his brother-in-law sat quiet in a pew till he could attend to them, and lookers-on see most of the game, of course. And they marked that there was one girl as the Reverend Pipchin put afore all the others. He was always calling on her to lend a hand or give an opinion. 'Twas like this he went :

“ ‘ Oh, Miss Wilson, will you please tell us where to put this turnip ? ’ Or like this : ‘ Oh, dear Miss Wilson, we want your light touch with this here vegetable marrow. It quite ruins the group ! ’ Or like this : ‘ Call Miss Wilson. These tomatoes be all wrong, and none but her can right 'em. ’

“ He was going nap on Miss Wilson without a doubt, and seeing she happened to be Squire Wilson's daughter, with two hundred a year of her own from her dead mother, even them common men understood, and wished him luck. But my brother reckoned he bored her above a bit, and when a young fellow in knickerbockers comed in and forgot to

take off his cap, she went to him and shook hands and took his cap off for him, and pretended to be cross with him. Then they could see that the fun of the fair was only just beginning so far as she was concerned. The young gentleman was from Bassett Hall, where the lord of the manor lives to, and he'd brought some wonnerful great bunches of purple grapes raised in the vineries there. And the Reverend Pipchin took 'em in his own hand, but he showed a good deal of colour when the chap in knickers coolly broke off a bunch for Miss Wilson to eat on the spot.

“ ‘Not here, not here, please !’ he said. ‘Remember where you are !’

“The two old men could see that there was a bit of feeling, and George whispered to Samuel: ‘I’ll back striped stockings !’ and he whispered back: ‘Nay, ’tis white choker will win her. They never can resist it.’

“Then Mr. Pipchin catched sight of them and beckoned them to rise up and go forward. So they did, and George’s brother-in-law took the paper off the model and showed it afore the people.

“A good few was wild with excitement, and young legs said out loud, in his fearless way, that it ought to get an extra prize for the best exhibit in the show—as if ’twas an agricultural meeting ! And this so riled the Reverend Pipchin that he rose up in his might and turned upon George and his brother-in-law and fairly crushed them.

“ ‘Quite out of the question—quite out of the question,’ he said. ‘Not at all the sort of thing we want or can use. It has no beauty and no meaning. It would only raise laughter. Take it away, please, at once !’

“A few of ’em stood up for Samuel, and Miss Wilson told the curate what he didn’t know—that Dicker always had a humble hand in the festival from times without count. But the young man stood firm, and fully meant ’em all

to understand that he was cock on his own dunghill. In a word, he bade Dicker be gone, and commanded everybody else to be quiet ; and so the two old chaps sneaked off with their tails between their legs.

“ Poor Samuel went so white as a dog’s tooth, and his yellow whiskers trembled, and his jaws worked that bivvering that George feared his teeth would fall out. My brother took the rick from him, and tried to cheer the unfortunate man up ; but try as he might, he failed to do it.

“ ‘ ’Twas just a bit of human nature,’ he said. ‘ The reverend gentleman seed that fine Miss Wilson wake up like the sun from behind a cloud when “ stockings ” came in the church, and it vexed him, because he’d been doing all he knowed to find favour with the maiden, and no doubt thought he was going strong. And so he got his shirt out, being young and human, after all, and he was just dancing to have a slap at something or somebody. ’Tis the fortune of many a hoss and many a man,’ George said, ‘ to get the lash that was meant for another. Think nought of it, and remember Billy Cottle have got five bob waiting for you in his till this minute.’

“ But the poor jolterhead, he crept away shaking with shame, and my brother couldn’t hearten him.

“ ‘ ’Tis the reward of pride,’ declared Dicker, ‘ and pride will have a fall, as we know too well. I thought in my vain-glorious way that my stack would have been a bit of the rejoicing and added to the glory of God by its cleverness ; and now my hope be knocked on the head, and no doubt I deserve it—not a doubt I do. ’Tis all over ; I shall never have nothing in the festival no more ! ’

“ He blinked his eyes and was at the point of tears. A meek man—meek as Moses, in fact—and never known to have no fight in him, except after sixpennyworth of the strongest.

“ Then, just as they was going out through the lich-gate, who should heave up but the vicar himself. The Reverend Champernowne was a big man in every way—big voice, big chin, big eyes, big nose, big body, and big mind. To see him of a Sunday sail in, with his white raiment billowing, was like they old fighting ships in Nelson’s days. And he’d come to his appointed place and glare in a solemn and noble manner at the assembled folk, and then sink down and bury his head in shining white, for all the world like a great angel bending afore the ark. Rode to hounds till he was seventy-four, did that man—one of the old, terrifying sort that thundered and shook spiders out of the cobwebs when he preached the Word. But they men be all gone. They talk quiet now, and hedge and beg instead of commanding, and they pretty near ax your pardon if they mention the bad place.

“ Samuel and George touched their heads and was going past, when the vicar stopped them, and George’s brother-in-law suffered another shock.

“ ‘ What have you there, Dicker ? ’ asks parson ; and Samuel, his words fouling each other, as they always did when he was excited, mumbled out that he had ventured to make a corn-stack for the harvest rejoicings, and hadn’t meant no harm by it ; and he hoped the vicar would overlook it this time and not harbour it against him.

“ ‘ Then why are you taking it away, my good man ? ’ asks the vicar.

“ ‘ Because the Reverend Pipchin says ’tis unseemly and out of order, and will make the people laugh, your reverence,’ says Samuel.

“ ‘ Set it there, Dicker, and I will examine it,’ answers back the vicar ; and with that Sammy puts the rick on a flat tombstone—one of they old ancient graves four square to the winds, holding forgotten dust from afore man’s memory.

“ Mr. Champernowne put up his glasses and pursed his mouth and breathed through his nose like a bull. ’Twas a habit that belonged to him, and he’d often do it in his sermons; and a very solemn thing, for it gave a deep thought time to sink into the mind. He walked twice round the little stack, so stately and slow as the Israelites round Jericho. Then he spoke.

“ ‘ Mr. Pipchin forbade it ? ’ he asked.

“ ‘ Yes, your reverence.’

“ The vicar looked over the graves and spoke to himself.

“ ‘ A frosty mind—no sympathy—no humour—no imagination—a school product—hopeless.’

“ George feared he must mean Samuel, and was for advising his brother-in-law to sloke off as quick as might be, because he knowed the poor gawk had suffered enough for one day. But parson didn’t mean Samuel, and events proved that ’twas none less than the Reverend Pipchin himself he aimed at !

“ The next thing that happened amazed my brother not a little, for the vicar told Samuel to pick up his stack and come back along with him into the church.

“ ‘ You have contributed to the glory of the season for these many years, Samuel Dicker,’ he said, ‘ and, even as the widow’s mite, your humble addition to these richer gifts lifted to the Lord of the harvest shall in no wise be rejected. Here are evidences of practical skill combined with patient enthusiasm. And what happier emblem of our festival than a rick of corn ? Do we not see in it the actual embodiment of the idea of the garnered grain ? We sing “ All is safely gathered in,” and this toy, trifling though it may appear to the eye of one who knows not the country and the symbols of our rural toil on the face of the land—this toy, I say, none the less speaks to me trumpet-tongued that our endeavours have been crowned

with abundance, and our granaries filled with good measure, pressed down and flowing over ! ’

“ The Reverend Champernowne said all this and more, just for the benefit of they two old men ; and if they’d been a full church, he couldn’t have used longer words or rolled ’em out more grand and forcible.

“ And then they went back to the people, and the vicar took the stack from Dicker’s hand and walked up the middle aisle with it, slow and stately, looking all around him, as if he was the harvest procession and harvest home all in his one solemn self. Everybody stopped to gaze upon him, but for George’s part he couldn’t take his eyes off the Reverend Pipchin. The poor unfortunate saw his mistake all too clearly now, and he fell back and stood dismayed and quivering to his marrow by the font, with a cowcumber in one hand and a brave bunch of Tripoli onions in t’other.

“ And the vicar, he marched straight through the gates and up the altar steps, and plumped down Sammy’s corn-stack slap in the middle of the holy table under the gold cross and between the Squire Bassett’s silver candlesticks—the second pair, for Squire made good the loss that Harry Hawke told us about.

“ There stood the stack, and there stood his reverence, and then he turned and said in a loud voice :

“ ‘ Friends, this little but precious emblem of seed-time and harvest shall occupy the sacred centre of the altar. It is comely, it is the work of a Christian man, it typifies all that with which we are just now concerned. Take care, Mr. Pipchin, that none meddles with it, for I myself have set it here under the symbol of our faith ! ’

“ Then he marched off, and of course no man in his senses would have dared to lay a finger on the rick. But Samuel went bang at the knees when he seed how he’d been lifted up. For a bit he was quite dead to the world, and

sat down lumpus in the first pew handy, and broke out in a fierce perspiration all over. He got over it, however, in course of time, and went home full of high joy along o' George. His only sorrow was that Mr. Pipchin might get a flea in his ear for ordering him off ; but I doubt not that such a wise one as the vicar let the lesser man down gently, and made no great ado about it.

“ ’Twas a mighty and long-remembered triumph for Samuel all round. Poor Mr. Pipchin walked all the way over to his place on the hill, for to tell him that he was heartily sorry for misunderstanding the corn-rick, owing to being a Cockney born and bred, no doubt ; and when the time came, the vicar mentioned the model in his sermon, and every eye turned and every neck craned to see the sight. The Reverend Champernowne didn't actually name Dicker by name in his discourse, but he mentioned one of the humblest among us, one whose laborious days had been passed in the bosom of the earth, one whose simple soul has been lifted annually to contribute in some sort to our annual celebration. And, of course, everybody knowed without telling who he meant.

“ And after ’twas all over, and the organs had done a-grunting and the lights was put out, a few old blids, George among the number, went across with Samuel to Cottle's house of refreshment ; and what with the glory, and the music, and the public notice, and the fuss and rejoicings in general, and the exciting hymns, Samuel got as properly drunk after evening service as you could expect to see any man. Not a drop too much had he taken for three months at the least ; but he let himself go that evening, and my brother, George, and policeman Reep saw him home after Cottle closed. He couldn't walk straight, and he couldn't see straight, but he could sing, and sing he did—not the harvest hymn, neither.

The Headstone of the Corner III

“ No doubt 'twasn't every policeman would have done what Arthur Reep did for a weak member that night ; but Reep was one of they men who be kindness made alive, and of course he knowed the particulars of the story, and he told George that he thought no more of the accident than he would to see a man blow his nose.”

THE CORDWAINER'S DAUGHTER

THE CORDWAINER'S DAUGHTER

JUST afore Farmer Jim Mumford was had up in front of the justices and fined for assaulting the nephew of Moses Butt, there was a proper tantarra at Widecombe, and all the women got in arms about it. No doubt, if Farmer Jim had falled in among a dozen mothers some fine day, they'd have treated him like the barn-yard hens treat a hawk as be thrown to 'em bound and alive—they'd have pecked the farmer to pieces ; and a good many amongst us reckoned that well he deserved it.

'Twas lively arguing, and none convinced his neighbour, because every mind was made up. Then, as often happens in such a case, there comed along a man with an open mind, and each side tried for all it was worth to convince the impartial chap.

'Twas no less a one than Johnny Rowland himself, landlord of 'The Plume of Feathers,' that refused to take sides in the matter, and for a bit I wondered, because every humane man was dead against Mumford ; and, of course, Johnny was full to the brim with the milk of human kindness, and ever ready to stand up for the weak and hardly treated. Many an old bachelor be tender as a woman at heart, and so was he ; therefore I was surprised, but not for long, because, being a man more than common clever at seeing another's purpose, and burrowing through his words to his thoughts, I soon found that Johnny was playing a game and sitting on the fence as a matter of business. While he pretended to see a bit of a case for Farmer Jim,

in truth he knew there was none. But the labour of trying to convince him and all the arguments and chatter made the people as dry as if they was chucked wi' dust, and they drank their quarts while struggling to make Johnny see their point of view. Every man had a try at him—from ancient Uncle Tom Cobleigh to young Harry Hawke, old Harry Hawke's son; and Nat Bradley had his say, and Samuel Bonus, he took the same side; and so did Gregory Snow, and, of course, Moses Butt—though silent as a fish most times—found his tongue about the assault, because it was his little nephew that had been treated so bad. And I—Tom Turtle—was against Mumford most steadfast also. In fact, Peter Gurney was the only man of much consequence that took Mumford's side; and there was a very good reason for that, because he married Mumford's niece, and hoped to get the biggest slice when farmer died and was cut up.

Hammer and tongs we were at it one night, and I was axed to begin at the very beginning and tell the tale all over again—how little Arthur Butt went into Farmer Jim's great five-acre field one April day, and wandered along where the stream winds under a hazel hedge. To pick Lent rosen¹ the harmless little boy had gone, and though 'twas well known that Farmer Jim had gived it out he would wallop any boy, or girl either, as he caught in the place, yet how can you be hard on the memory of a child of six year old? At any rate, the lad vowed after that he didn't know he was doing wrong, and none doubted his word. He just went in where there was a lot of ewes and lambs, and he played along with the other young things, and laughed to see 'em frisk and chase round, and twinkle their tails and run about him on their shaky legs.

¹ Daffodils.

Then off he goes by the stream and sees the daffadownillies shining so gay, and thinks on his mother, as a proper little boy would. And then he works away so hard as he knows how for to pluck a great nosegay, and he'd just got so many as his little fat hands would hold, and was setting off, proud as possible, when up runs Farmer Jim with a stout sapling ash, and whips the poor nipper till he yowls wi' pain and cries for his father to save him. He drops his bunch o' flowers and his cap, and then, when farmer let him go, he runs shouting and screaming down the village to his home and his mother. His poor little sit-down was all in great weals, where the cowardly old hunks had flogged him, and that bad was he, wi' all his nerves shattered, that they had to fetch doctor to him ; and when he come, he was so savage as the mother's self, and that was saying a lot.

So I went over the ground, and left out nought, and explained how Arthur Butt, the child's father, at his wife's wish, was going off the same evening to get the worth of forty shillings or a month out of Farmer Jim ; and how he started with that object, and how he fell in with some person or persons unknown, as made him change his mind ; and then up spoke Johnny Rowland and let the cat out of the bag, and had his laugh at us.

“ 'Twas I,” said he, “ that met Arthur Butt that evening, and 'twas I prevailed with him to stay his hand. Not for love of Farmer Jim did I do it, but because I didn't want Butt to get into trouble. There's times when you must take the law in your own hands, because the law haven't any truck with one side of human nature, and it don't deal with many things that may mean life or death to a proud man or an honourable one. The law's a mean, sneaking creation very often, and justice and equity don't always run in double harness, as we all live to find out soon or

late ; but, you see, Arthur Butt be thirty-five, and Farmer Jim's seventy—not too old to have a lesson, but too old to get a flogging. I put it to Arthur and advised him to act differently. I said it would be a very good thing for the old man to be pulled up and punished for his brutal conduct since he well deserved it ; but I advised Arthur to go to work different and give the law a chance first. And the justices may be trusted to take a proper view, I honestly believe, even though Farmer Jim have got that clever, shifty, brow-beating chap, Lawyer Baskerville, from Totnes, to stand up for him. Mark me, he won't save Farmer Jim, and the old man will be punished in his pocket and told very straight the time is past when people can behave like heathen savages."

So spoke Johnny, and since he'd silenced the argyment and spoiled all by throwing himself with us against that cantankerous neighbour, the talk fell flat and a silence came over the company. Seeing which, innkeeper, as knew that silent men soon went their way, struck into the yarn about Avisa Mumford, the cordwainer's daughter.

Of course, I'd heard it, and so had Harry Hawke and so had Bonus, for he was a sort of relative of the Mumfords, though he pretended he was not ; but Snow hadn't listened to the tale, nor yet Moses Butt, nor yet Bradley. Therefore innkeeper set sail in his usual fashion, first drinking the very good health of Moses Butt, who insisted on standing him a drink, so soon as he heard that Rowland was for little Arthur Butt and against Farmer Jim.

" 'Twas a bit ago, but I'm always terrible interested in people, and they know it, and so—just out of the kindness that's packed into a corner in most of us—the folk have always told me their stories one time and another. For every man Jack and woman Jill amongst us have a tale tucked away somewhere, and, of course, a terrible lot of

people take their tale with 'em to the grave. In fact, I've got a notion that the silent sort have the best stories hid, if we could only quarry 'em out. But now and again, when death's knocking, 'twill loosen the doors that we bang home on memory, and more'n once them that were pluming for flight have told me things worth knowing, and surprised my senses uncommon. So it was with Avisia Mumford.

"Never a woman knowed better'n her how to keep her mouth shut on a tricky subject, and never a woman was more reluctant to pull up the blind on her own life; but when she was going home—a longful time ago now—I took her some port wine for friendship, and the deed so much amazed her that she opened her ancient mouth for once, and told me a tale of another drink well worth my bottle of wine.

"Daughter of Obediah Westmacott she was, and I've heard my father tell about him. The cordwainers be a vanished race nowadays, for we all walk in ready-made boots, and have no use for any save the cobbler; but Obediah made boots to measure, and the blacksmith helped him. When Westmacott had done his part, to the farrier went his goods, that they might 'be 'tackled' and fitted with plates and shoes of iron. Avisia was the old man's daughter, and 'twas her part, year in year out, to carry the boots to the smithy. There worked Joseph Mumford, great-uncle of our Farmer Jim.

"Jo was a rough customer, but a good workman. He lived hard, scorned women, and harboured one eternal grievance; and that was against his only brother, Mark. Mark, you see, inherited the farm and land. He had the elder brother's portion, and his father liked him best; but Joseph grumbled long and bitter about it and never would endure it like a reasonable creature. For this reason.

His brother was only ten minutes older than himself, and Jo always held that, where twins were concerned, there ought to be share and share alike. But his father wasn't of his mind, and when the lads turned eighteen, he wrote his will and apprenticed Mark to the land, and made Joseph a blacksmith. No doubt the character of the young fellows influenced their father a bit, for though as like as two peas, to the eye of the chance beholder, their natures were very different, and Mark was similar to his father—a man of peace; but Joseph was not. One of the fighting, reckless sort he was, and none ever thought that he'd knuckle under and bide a blacksmith. But he proved 'em wrong, for he took to the work, and it suited his great thews and sinews. In fact, he soon found that he was a very clever man with hot iron. 'Twas said, however, that he was only getting into trim for his hereafter, and a sharp chap once declared that the Dowl's self dwelt in the forge with Joseph Mumford. For his temper was as fiery as his business; he never could control it, and time and again he was on the edge of grave trouble. He was a bit of a bully, too—in fact, much like his great-nephew, Farmer Jim—for Nature playeth tricks of that sort, and you'll often be puzzled to know where a man came from, till you hear tell about his vanished kith and kin. Humans will break back, just like cattle, and our old, rusty farmer have more of his great-uncle Jo in him than his grandfather Mark.

“ The blacksmith hated Mark most steadfast, in season and out, and though the elder twin was kind enough, and shared and shared alike when the father died, nought would pacify Joseph: the more Mark gave, the more he craved. 'Twas a share in the land that he wanted, and chance, or the devil, knowing his weakness, set a trap for him. Times were rough then, and man hadn't the security against his fellow-man that he has to-day. Little was done for the

poor but make 'em work to live, and they were driven by every wind that blew, you might say. Nobody was taught or minded, and if you fell ill, or broke your leg, or got half a score of children, or ruined yourself any other way, there wasn't none to help, and you was at the mercy of the world. And the law was weaker than now in some ways, though stronger in others. But Joseph had a streak of the savage in him and a good pinch of the fox. So he didn't fear the law, yet was cunning enough to set about breaking it in such a way that his sin should not find him out. And life dealt thus with him and turned him to listen to the devil's whisper.

"It began with a curious discovery that he made concerning a woman.

"Avisa Westmacott, according to her own tale to me, weren't much to look at in her youth, but she had a grand head of black hair and was built on a large pattern. It happened with her, however, like it does with most, and love tickled her at twenty. But the man she'd lost her heart to didn't know it: 'twas another made the discovery, and only happed on it by accident. The girl stood in the forge-mouth talking to Jo one day, while he finished tackling a pair of her father's boots for which she had come; and while he blew the bellows, he grunted about his troubles, and expected her to say how sorry she felt for him.

"'Twins be twins,' he said, 'and 'tis a scabby, shameful thing, and never grows no better, to think I was kindiddled out of my rightful share of land and house. Everything—everything alike about us to a hair, except that I be twice the man that Mark is. The same hatchet noses, the same brown eyes, the same moustaches, the same way of showing our teeth when we'm angered, the same liking in food and drink, the same cusses, the same——"

"'Stuff!' says Avisa, interrupting him. 'If you saw

your brother oftener, you'd not talk that twaddle. You'm as different as chalk from cheese in everything but your great arms and your great strength. He's easy, you're hard; he's handsome, you're ugly; his voice be gentle and kindly, you snort and snap and snarl like a savage dog.'

"You see, love has terrible searching eyes, and though them men looked like enough to all the rest of the world, they didn't to Avisia, because she cared for one, but had no use for t'other.

"'My inners! I'm hearing things!' says Jo. 'I've always been rather well satisfied to talk to you, Avisia Westmacott, because you say what you think, and ban't afeared of man or mouse—very different from most women, who weigh every word, and never tell the truth if a lie will do. So you like Mark better'n you like me?'

"'Ess fay,' she answers him, 'and who wouldn't? He's a rare, big-hearted chap, and you can see what a kindly spirit he has in his face. He's gentle even to a naughty child. I do like him. Who wouldn't?'

"Joseph turned that over in his mind, for he was a man who knew that all knowledge may be useful. For the minute he couldn't see that the fact of Avisia caring for Mark much mattered to anybody but herself, especially as Mark was the same as his brother in the matter of females, and never thought much upon them; but he stored up the news, to chew over it later, and finished the boots and let Avisia go on her way without more talk.

"He was on to her again, though, presently, and worked pretty clever at her, and blackguarded his brother, just to hear the girl take the farmer's part. Then he changed his tone and spoke lies, to see if he could make her believe them.

"'I don't hold with marrying and giving in marriage,'

he said. ' 'Tis a fool's game, and nine out of ten as be playing it this minute would tell you so if they dared ; but sometimes the deed has to be done, and 'tis one of the troubles of owning a farm that a man generally thinks to get an heir for it. And so Mark will wed, I suppose.'

" 'Not that you want him to,' she answered. ' 'Tis well known you've told out afore company at ' The Plume of Feathers ' and ' The Ring o' Bells,' that you'd out-live Mark Mumford if you had to wait a hundred years to do so.'

" ' Stuff and nonsense ! ' he answered. ' I'm past that foolishness. I'm very willing for him to marry. I daresay we'll be friends again some day. We get cooler as we get older. Perhaps the man will find a wife presently as will bring us together.'

" She was a good bit surprised to hear him say that ; and she was pleased, too, for though a silly sort of woman, the maiden was just and decent-minded. But 'twas her simpleness he built on.

" ' I hope such a thing will happen,' she told him, and he answered that he wouldn't say but what he hoped so, too. Then he left it and spoke no more on the subject for a good bit.

" But his hookem-snivey brains was hatching out something all the while, and there were other things that he did before he went for Avisia again. He began to tone down a bit, not all of a sudden, of course—too clever for that—but gradual and slow. He cussed his brother less often, and bore to hear his name without getting in a rage. And he was friendly to the Westmacotts likewise. He dropped in and had a dish o' tea with 'em two Sundays running, and spoke that civil that old Obediah rubbed his eyes and said to his girl : ' Be shot if the fierce chap ban't after you, Avisia ! '

“ But his daughter didn't think so, and didn't want him, nohow.

“ They talked together again presently, and Joseph began to wonder if he'd ever make it up with Mark and say he was a cruel lonely man, and so on. Then he asked Avisia again what she thought of Mark, and the girl, not built to hide anything in that quarter, purred about the blacksmith's brother and said she'd never seen his like.

“ ‘ Be gormed if you don't love him ! ’ plumps out Joseph. ‘ 'Tis useless for you to deny it to me.’

“ ‘ Ess fay ! ’ she answers. ‘ I love the ground he walks on ! ’

“ So do I,’ says Joseph, with his grim laugh, ‘ for 'tis mine as much as his. But that's neither here nor there, You've told me your secret, like the brave creature you are, and I'll respect it—be sure of that. And, what's more, if my brother have got to be married, I'll say this : he couldn't have a woman better like to suit him than you.’

“ She shook her head at that. ‘ Mark don't want a woman about him,’ she answered—‘ not yet, anyway. But if ever he takes one, she'll be lucky.’

“ Joseph agreed with her. ‘ I'm beginning to understand my brother better,’ he declared, ‘ and I see two things—that he's a bit out of the common, as you say, and I ought to be proud of him, and that 'tis time he thought about the next generation and his son and heir. I speak frankly to you, Avisia Westmacott, because we're old friends now, and you've got a terrible lot of sense ; and this I will say, that if I was a marrying man, I'd offer for you myself.’

“ ‘ 'Tis very kind, I'm sure,’ she answered, ‘ but don't you do that, Mr. Mumford, because I don't want you.’

“ ‘ No doubt,’ he said. ‘ All the same, I owe you something for opening my eyes a bit concerning Mark. I have to thank you there. You read his character very clever,

and I mean to try and make up our quarrel, if I can, and be his enemy no more.'

"From that time forward Joseph appeared to change altogether, and everybody felt terrible astonished to hear as he'd grown friendly with Mark. But so it was, and in secret Avisá got the credit from the blacksmith. He kept her on tenter-hooks, in a manner of speaking, and was always saying what a wife she'd make for Mark, and always cross-questioning her as to how she was getting on with him. So she begged that he'd think no more of what she'd confessed to him.

" 'Me and your brother be very good friends and no more,' she said. 'He's very kind and civil, and once he went so far as to ax me to go for a walk with him. He was careful to say he didn't mean keeping company nor nothing like that, and I said I quite understood. But I went, and he talked over all the girls in Widecombe, and axed me, in a casual sort o' way, what I thought of 'em as wives. He's wishful to marry, and he's looking round, but 'tis certain that I be the last woman in his mind. Therefore I hope you'll forget what I said. 'Twould be a dreadful thing to happen if he heard it.'

"Joseph appeared to be troubled at that.

" 'Dash my wig!' he answered. 'How blind a man can be! Here's you, ready to his hand, and made for him every way—just the living woman he wants—and yet he must be looking further! Who is he after?'

" 'Nobody,' she told him. 'I was quite fair and honest, and praised half a score. But he always had something against 'em. They was too tall, or too short, or too noisy, or too silly. Some laughed too much, and others too little; some worked too hard, and weren't never game for a revel; and others didn't work enough, and was sure to spend all his money. In fact, I got weary of the talk, and axed

him at last what sort of a girl he did want. Then he said, a simple, healthy, modest sort of a girl, who knew the worth of money and the value of peace. She had to be dark, and if she could sing a bit, so much the better. Medium height she had to be, and not the sort that run to fatness after forty. And a sure "foal-bearer"—that was his own expression.'

" 'Well,' cried Joseph, 'what a flitter-mouse¹ the man must be! He might have been describing you yourself, Avisia! 'Tis the very picture of you!'

"She laughed, and begged as he'd say no more on the subject. But the time was come to say a lot more, and chance helped Joseph in his purpose. It seemed that, for some reason he didn't explain, he was perfectly determined for Mark to take Avisia, and he told the girl presently, much to her anger, that he'd named her name to his brother. She was properly furious then, and said as she'd never speak to him no more; but he let her flare herself out, and then made it up.

" 'Don't be a silly fool!' he said. 'I ban't thinking of you, and I don't care a cuss for your feelings; I'm thinking of my brother Mark, and his future. I've had the luck to hit on the one woman in the world to make him a valuable wife, and I'm going to bring it about, and do him such a turn that he'll bless me to his dying day. You love him, and you admit it, else I shouldn't be so busy, but the hardest half of the battle's won; and since he's in one of them silly states that men get into, that prevents 'em from seeing their own good, then it behoves his well-wishers to work for him; and I shouldn't be the friend to Mark that henceforth I mean to be if I didn't further this. Now, just you listen to me, Avisia Westmacott. It lies in a nut-

¹ Bat.

shell. Your woman's instinct tells you that you'd make a perfect wife for that man, and my male wits tell me the same. I'm no mumphead, and I know you both well by now. Then what's the problem before us? Why, to make Mark come forward, and open his eyes to the truth of his luck. Do you know Nancy White—her that lives up to Metherill with her daft son, Kek White?'

“ ‘I know about her,’ said Avis. ‘She’s a terrible bad old woman, and was ducked for a witch some years agone.’

“ ‘She’s not bad at all; but the folk be frightened of her, and ’tis a case of give a dog a bad name and hang him. She’s wondrous clever and wondrous kind, and time and again, wi’ her cautcheries, she’s cured my brother’s cattle and cured me. A white witch, if a witch at all. She’ll always do anybody a good turn if ’tis in her power, but not for all the money in the Bank of England would she do anybody a bad turn, even if she could.’

“ ‘What can she do, then?’ asked Avis. ‘She may be clever—and that’s not denied—but she can’t make your brother want me if he don’t.’

“ ‘It isn’t that he don’t,’ the man answered. ‘He’s just hovering, and all he needs is a gentle push in the right direction afore he turns elsewhere. And ’tis just that gentle push that Nancy White knows how to give him. You mustn’t think that she’d take the law into her own hands and mix a love philtre to *make* him love you, or anything like that. Of course, I wouldn’t allow such a thing, and no more would you. But this she can do, and willingly she would—just for kindness to two young creatures, and all free of charge. She’d give you a potion made of a herb of might what she knows about—’tis moon-wort, I believe, gathered at a certain hour and season; and mingled, no doubt, with other things, the drink would do this on

Mark. 'Twould clear his eyes if they be dim, and screw up his spirit if it be weak. I beg you'll understand me exactly, Avisa, because I don't want for you to think I'm forcing Mark's hand, or turning him towards you by a witch's trick. I'd scorn to do such a wicked deed as that. No, this stuff that Nancy told me about—I mentioned no names but my own, and pretended 'twas for me—does nought but clear the understanding and show a man what accident hath hid. If in sober truth you be the woman for Mark, as I think, then, after this charm, he'll know it and our object will be gained; if you ban't for him, the charm will leave him just as he is, and nought will come of it. 'Tis innocence itself.'

"Avisa thought a lot upon that. But one thing puzzled her. 'How d'you mean you pretended it was for yourself?' she asked; and he had his answer ready. 'Why, I told Nancy that I was in doubt about a young woman—whether to offer for her or not. And she said 'twas a common state, and provided for by a charm that she'd used a score of times, and never known to fail. "I keep it by me," she said, "so often have I the need of it." With that she drew off half a wine-glass of stuff—so clear as crystal—and put it in a bottle for me. "Drink that next time you go walking with the maiden," said Jane, "and afore you've been with her half an hour, you'll know, as clear as clear, whether she's to be the one. It'll come in your mind like a flash of lightning. 'Tis a charm that my old father taught me, and I never charge for it till after; but when it have done its work, the grateful ones often give me five shillings for easing their minds one way or another."

"With that, Joseph brought out his little bottle, and Avisa looked at it.

"'You'll do what you like,' said Joseph, 'but, if you take my advice, you'll plan to get him to drink it. There's

only one thing to say. None must know about it—naturally. If you're game, I'll get him to ask me and you, one Sunday evening, to the farm, and you can pour out tea for us and pop it into his cup. Then I'd make a shift to go, and leave you alone with him while his sight is being cleared to see you as you are. I've little doubt in my own mind that it will come over him in a flash, and that he'll offer for you afore he lets you go. And if he didn't—why, there it is, and we know once and for all that you ban't for him.'

"She thought a lot before she spoke. You must remember that these things happened a mighty long time ago, and charms and witchcraft meant a lot more then to simple folk than they do now. Besides, she was a believing soul at best. 'Twas a great temptation to Avisa, and the way that Joseph put it calmed all fear; for she argued the charm weren't a fierce and terrible drug, that would make Mark love her willy-nilly, but just a harmless thing that would open his eyes and perhaps help him to see what a useful and likely creature she was. In fact, Joseph put the matter in that shape. 'If he likes you, we shall soon know it; if he don't—well, no harm's done,' he said.

"But she didn't decide in a minute. She was a deliberate woman, who looked all round an apple before she bit it, and she felt this business wanted a lot of looking round, and said so.

"He didn't grumble at that. 'Take your time,' he said. 'Think of it from every point of view; but don't tell nobody else—not a soul—because, if you do that, the charm be spoiled. You mustn't let out a whisper, or else you might so well take a drop of water from the spring, for the stuff will fail.'

"So she went home to think; and her thinking, in my opinion, is the most interesting part of the tale. There was

three to consider, you see—herself, Mark, and Jo. And first she thought of Mark, and decided that she was doing him no wrong, because he was the very man to have a wife, and she was the very woman to be that wife. She knew it—felt it in her bones. She understood the man as well as she understood herself and better ; she knew, as surely as she knew the Lord saves from sin, that she could make him a very proper, patient helpmate. Then of herself she thought, and couldn't disguise from herself that she wanted the man something terrible. No false modesty had Avisá, even with others, so you'll guess that she didn't fool herself about her desires. That left Joseph, and there the trouble began. For, turn it over as she might, she couldn't for her life see why he was so terrible hungry that she should take Mark. What good came to him by that? Why, none at all. 'Twould probably mean childer for Mark, and the other man's last hope gone for ever of getting the farm, either for himself or any offspring he might have in the time to come. 'Twas true that Joseph and Mark were good pals now, for a year had passed since Jo got friendly with Avisá, and during that time the brothers, by gradual stages, had come together again ; but such friendliness that reigned betwixt 'em couldn't account in Avisá's mind for this fixed resolve of Joseph's that she must wed his brother. She turned it inside out and outside in, but could see no light. Then she thought to tell her father about it ; but that she dursn't do, because any such thing would spoil the charm. She went round and round it, and hit on everything but the truth ; and after that day she studied Joseph like a bird studies a doubtful caterpillar. At last, however, she decided—at any rate, for a time—that his idea was first-rate, and found herself in a mind to try it. Then she told him so, and he was pleased to hear her decision.

“ Then he planned the tea-party, and Avisá was to take

the charm in her pocket ; but when Saturday came, she didn't close her eyes for thinking of the morrow. The hour fixed was four o'clock, and Mark Mumford wondered what was up, though he felt very pleased to do his brother a service. Yet when Avisá came along alone at three o'clock—an hour too soon—Mark was much astonished and a bit vexed, because she arrived in the middle of his Sunday afternoon nap—a thing he didn't like being broken in upon. However, his guest soon made him very wide awake.

“ He came down to her in his shirt-sleeves, yawning a bit. Then he put on his coat, as he'd left hanging over the arm-chair after dinner, and took his pipe from the mantel-shelf, and axed her why she'd arrived an hour too soon.

“ With that she made a clean breast of it, and Mark's pipe very soon went out, I promise you.

“ ‘ I be going to tell you the truth,’ she said, ‘ though 'tis hard, for I'd feel cruel sorry to anger you against me, Mr. Mark ; but 'tis like this, and don't you be shocked till you hear all. I love you. I'm very sorry about it, I'm sure ; but there 'tis, and a thing have happened that makes me feel I've got to tell you. You needn't be scared, nor stare like that, nor think it an unmaidenly or improper idea on my part. 'Tis quite a respectful feeling, and I ban't ashamed of it no more than you'd be ashamed if you was to care for one of them girls you named over to me when us went walking together.’

“ ‘ I've never excited no hopes in you, Avisá, and you can't say I have,’ answers Mark, on his guard.

“ ‘ You never have,’ she answered. ‘ You've never led me to hope, and I ban't telling you this to put you in a corner—far from it. I'm telling you because I must tell you.’

“ ‘ You ought to restrain your feelings,’ he said. ‘ You've

spoilt all now. Very like, in fulness of time, if I'd tried elsewhere and failed, I might have come round to you ; but telling me this have set me right against you. 'Tisn't a nice thing to have done, and I'm much disappointed in you.'

“ ‘That's all right,’ she answered, ‘and for that matter I'm disappointed, too—to think that you could hold me so low as to suppose I'd tell you this without a terrible big reason. But I tell you, as I say, because I must ; and that's not to mean I'm busting with it, or have got to bring it out. 'Tis only to say that, loving you with all my heart, I put you afore anything—even my own secrets.’

“ ‘If you've heard anything as I ought to know, of course 'tis your duty to tell me,’ he answered ; ‘but be that as it will, it ban't leap year, and it can't have been proper to tell me you loved me. You won't convince me of that.’

“ However, she very soon did. She put it as clear as her poor command of speech could compass. She told him how his brother had found out that she loved him, and how his brother had much wished him to marry her. ‘He didn't want to take any unfair advantage—so he said ; he only wanted for you to see me as I am. “Then,” said he, “Mark must be made to know you're the right one.” And so he fetched a famous charm from Nancy White and gived it to me to give to you in your tea. If you'd drunk it, and if I'm the right woman for you, you'd very soon have found your eyes open ; and if I was not the one for you, then the charm would have had no effect. That's how it stood ; and if I had done what Joseph wanted me to do, I should have poured the stuff in your tea presently, unbeknownst to you ; but—but—somehow—after a sleepless night, I felt—I felt cruel doubtful if 'twas a seemly thing, and I had to fight between believing him and

hoping for the best, and ruining my own chances and telling you what we had meant to do. I prayed about it half the night, and at last 'twas put in me to tell you. So there it is, and here's the stuff—useless now, because I've told 'e.'

“With that she brought out the little bottle, and Mark, his eyes pretty round, took it from her, opened it, and smelt it. But that told him nothing, and he corked it up again.

“‘I hope to God I've done right,’ she said. ‘Tis rather a strange come-along-of-it for a maiden to tell a man she's fond of him; but I could not explain very well without giving you all the facts, and——’

“‘Be quiet—be quiet!’ he answered. ‘Let me think afore my brother comes. This may be all right, and just a part of the new friendship that he's got for me; but, on the other hand, it may be all wrong, and—and——’

“‘Of course, if 'tis more powerful than he pretends, and might turn you to love me against your will, I wouldn't have you drink it on no account whatever,’ says Avisia.

“He laughed at that, though 'twas an ugly fashion of laugh. ‘You poor zany!’ he answered her. ‘Don't you see what—— But of course you don't. However, I do—luckily for myself. Yes, it may be a darned sight more powerful than he pretends, no doubt. Heaven above! How if 'twas made of deadly nightshade or some dreadful thing like that?’

“‘Lord, Mr. Mark! You don't mean——’ she gasped, and turned white, and fell a-shivering.

“‘I don't mean nothing—except not to drink it,’ he said. ‘As for you, you've done right, and will get your reward presently. I think a lot of you for this. 'Tis quite within the bounds of hope that I'll offer for you afore long, for I don't know as I could do better, especially after you've showed yourself an honest creature, and not wishful to

trap me into nothing against my will. But first there's my brother and this here bottle.'

"The cat walked in the room at the moment, and Mark, as wasn't much addicted to the creature, bade Avisa pour him out a dish of milk. Then he dropped in half of the clear liquid from the phial.

"'If 'tis harmless, Tom won't be none the worse,' he said, 'and it ban't likely to upset his love affairs neither, because he's got a large heart, and gathers his roses where he may, according to the old song.'

"The cat went for his tea in good spirits, and lapped up the milk very clever. Then, just as he was washing his face, he gave one sudden screech and was a goner. He dropped by the fender, struggled half a second, and was so dead as a stone; and Avisa and Mark were bending over him—pretty horrified, you may be sure—when in came Joseph, so gay as you please, all in his Sunday best and smiling like a picture.

"'Good evening, Jo!' said Mark. ''Tis a coorious thing to happen, but my cat have just gone and died. And I don't think us'll go on with the party, because I don't feel hungry nor yet thirsty this afternoon. This have took away my appetite. Tom was so well as you or me half a minute ago. Avisa, my dear, you'd do best to slip home along now, because I want to have a bit of a tell wi' my brother.'

"Calm and steady as a rock he kept and Avisa, for the first time, saw what a strong man Mark was under his easy manner. So when she married him six months later, it didn't come as such a big surprise to her as it might have done.

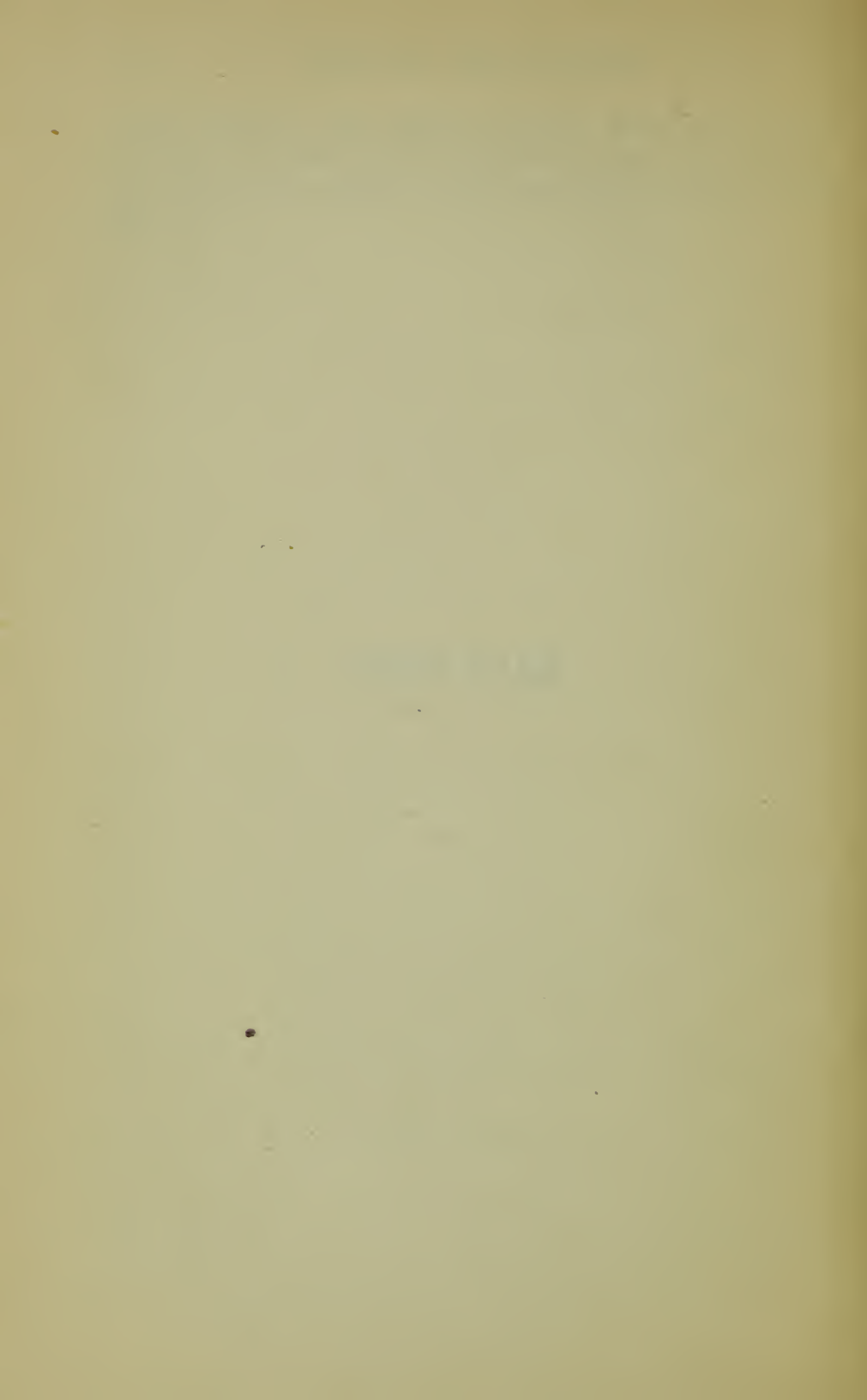
"Not till long after that great event did she hear what befell between the brothers; then Mark told her. But the result of the meeting all men had larned in a week.

“ ‘When you'd gone,' said her husband to the cordwainer's daughter, 'I sat my brother down in a chair by the dead cat, and showed him the little bottle you'd brought. There weren't no call for many words, because he tumbled to it very quick what had happened. White as curds he went, and if I'd poured the stuff in a mug and commanded him to let it down, such was his baffled and shaking state that I believe he'd have took it without a fight. I'd made up my mind what to do, and I done it. "You've tried your wicked best to murder me, Joseph Mumford," I said, "and, but for an unexpected streak of sense in that maiden, as you didn't know was in her, you'd have succeeded. 'Tis only by God's watchful mercy that I ban't lying so dead as thicky cat this minute. And I give you one fortnight to get out of England—one fortnight only. Where you go I care not ; but you shan't bide in your own land no more, unless it be behind bolts and bars. You've tried to murder your own flesh and blood—an innocent man, as never did you no wrong in his life, or thought wrong against you ; and you plotted to do it by the hand of an innocent woman. The more said, the blacker it looks. But I forgive you, according to the command of my Saviour, and bid you begone. Never you speak to me no more, and never you speak to Avis Westmacott no more. And for the rest of your life I hope you'll mourn the blackguard deed you've tried to do, and pray the forgiving Lord to pardon you. Now get up and go ; and if you're at the forge or anywheres in England this day fortnight, I'll have you took up and let all be known.' ”

“ That's the queer tale, and none heard it—no, not her own children—till Mrs. Mumford was dying. And as for Joseph, all she remembered about him was that he did as his brother bade him, and cleared out. But his after history wasn't known, though 'tis very like it would have been

worth hearing. Us'll hope he had no hand in the next generation, for them as have the heart to put a twin-brother out of the world oughtn't to have the power to bring a child into it."

HALF-MAST



HALF-MAST

'T WAS Moses Butt astonished us one fine night by suddenly axing a question—a most uncommon thing for him to do.

“Hast heard of late about they Tucketts?” he said to Gregory Snow. But Greg had not; no more had I.

Johnny Rowland knew about 'em, however, and he was able to tell Moses Butt that they'd left Widecombe and gone down Ashburton way.

“A roving stone be that man,” said Johnny. “He's tried the sea and the land; but nothing much has come of it so far.”

“Mercy Tuckett's a patient woman,” declared Samuel Bonus, who knew 'em.

“Wasn't always, however,” answered Johnny. And then he told us this yarn about the Tucketts in their earlier days, when they lived to Daleham and he was a fisherman.

“You must think of Mercy and her husband as a lot younger,” he began. “And you must fancy you see a little cottage—semi-detached—perched up on Daleham cliff. And you must suppose you be listening to Mercy's rather high-pitched voice, dressing down Fred for all he's worth. And don't you suppose that I be libelling either one or t'other of 'em, for I ban't. I had the tale from Mercy herself.”

Then away went Johnny, imitating Mrs. Tuckett like this:

“‘And if you think 'twas a proper or a manly or an honest thing to go gallivanting to a fair without your wife,

then I'll tell you it wasn't ; and if you be going to enjoy whole days of your life away from me, I'll soon make the village ring with it, and let them as fancy you're a proper husband know what you really are ! '

" Mercy Tuckett withered him like that for half an hour, and her husband sat and listened with every outward sign of regret. Once, while she paused to take breath, a faint murmur was heard through the party wall of the Tuckett home, and the man smiled.

" ' I should much like to know what you're grinning at ! ' cried Mercy. ' At your own wicked thoughts, no doubt. However, there's a time coming, Frederick, when you'll grin on the wrong side of your face, if I'm anybody ! '

" ' ' Twasn't that,' he answered ; ' but if you'll shut your mouth a minute, you'll hear Mrs. Leaman next door dressing down Jack, just the same as you be dressing down me. Him and me often compare notes after a breeze ashore, and 'tis just a toss of a ha'penny whether you or Jane Leaman have the sharpest tongue.'

" ' ' Is it ? And who sharpened 'em ? Seaman's so bad as you ; and if you shouldn't hear the ugly truth in your homes, where should you hear it ? You work together in the boat and conspire wickedness against your wives, and only us and God Almighty knows what you both are, for you hoodwink everybody else, and the people think you're a pair of pattern husbands, and little guess what 'tis behind the scenes.'

" ' ' That's true,' said the man, warming up, ' because Jack and me be a lot too proud to tell 'em ; but if 'twas known what a hell of a time we have——'

" He stopped and cooled down again.

" ' ' But there, I ban't going to quarrel. Jack and me made a mistake to go to the fair and we be sorry for it, so enough said.'

“ ‘Not at all! You shan’t pass if off with sorrow. I know too well what your sorrow is worth. Lasts till you be out of sight of your home and no longer.’

“ ‘ ’Tis the best I can do, Mercy. After all, what was the crime? We ran the boat into Torbay because the wind skewed and we couldn’t get back to Daleham. And we sold the fish and went ashore and found that Brixham Fair was going on, so we had a bit of a spree. Who wouldn’t? You didn’t expect us to telegraph for you and Jane? And I brought you home a fairing, and Jack fetched home two cocoanuts for his wife, and what the deuce more you expected——?’

“ ‘I expected you to remember what you said when you married me,’ answered Mercy, and she jawed at him until Mr. Tuckett rose, lost his temper, and prepared to depart.

“ ‘You’ll drive me mad with your trash! I thought I’d married a sane woman, not a ninny-hammer. Talk—talk—talk—and all tomfoolery at that! Look round—look round, woman, and listen to a few other men’s wives, and hear a bit about what men are—not what you think they should be. Who be you, that have been wedded a bare year, to lay down the whole law and the prophets about husbands? You’re a fool—a noisy, clacking, narrow minded fool, and you don’t know your luck. And I’ll tell you this: I’m sick of it—sick and tired of it. I’ve a good mind to sail to-night and drop over the side after dark, and get the peace under the sea I can’t get ashore—like poor Luke Sweet did last month. Then you’ll begin to understand what life means, and see if ’tis better to be a widow than a wife.’

“ The fairing that he had brought her stood on the table, and he picked it up, flung it on the floor and stamped his foot on it. The gift was a large box of chocolate creams, and treated that way it left some work for his wife.

“ ‘Where are you going ? ’ she cried, as he took his hat from the table. ‘ You haven’t been in the house an hour.’

“ ‘No ; and that was an hour too long. I don’t know where I’m going, and don’t care, so ’tis out of reach of your tongue,’ says Fred.

“ He left his home and descended to the quay. Daleham be like a swallow’s nest sticking to the hill and far below the fleet of boats rocked together. It was Saturday, and most of them had returned for the week-end. Some lay at the quay-side ; some rode at anchor without the harbour ; a few were still homeward bound.

“ Fred Tuckett and his partner, John Leaman, shared a small trawler. Each had married within the year ; each had saved money and prospered at his business ; each had won a bit of money with his wife. But certain little errors of outlook on the side of Mercy and Jane promised to bring all to ruin. The women were school friends and saw alike. Their youth, hot temper, and general inexperience of the male animal was breeding trouble.

“ They lived side by side, and the wives were the best of friends ; but they lacked power to help each other, since they looked at life from exactly the same standpoint.

“ Now, as Frederick Tuckett passed his mate’s door, the mournful mug of Jack Leaman met his gaze, framed between a red geranium and a red cactus in the parlour window. His features, too, were red, but while the flowers looked cheerful, Jack’s face, with its fiery cheeks and tawny fan-shaped beard, lacked either hope or cheer.

“ Mr. Tuckett, who was skipper, and from force of character took the lead, signalled to Jack ; whereupon t’other man gladly joined him. The red chap spoke.

“ ‘ I heard yours going it when mine stopped to fetch her breath,’ he said.

“ ‘ Yes ; and I heard yours. It can't last much longer. I'm losing my self-respect, Jack, and I lost my temper afore I left her.’

“ ‘ I should have done the same if I'd got one. 'Tis us that be to blame, Frederick. Us didn't ought to have married Ilfracombe women. No good comes from the north.’

“ Mr. Leaman was superstitious, you see.

“ ‘ I lost my temper,’ repeated Fred. ‘ I said that some fine night I'd go to sea and make a hole in the water. And then I left her.’

“ ‘ Funny you should have spoke that ! I didn't lose my temper—having none to lose. But, in a lull, I up and said : ‘ Look here, Jane, enough be so good as a feast—and enough I've had. There's your cocoanuts and here be I, and neither mortal man nor boat can stand more than the weather they're built to stand. Your voice gets on my nerves like a dog barking in the night,’ I said to my wife, ‘ and if there's much more of it,’ I said, ‘ I won't be accountable for my actions.’ 'Twas strong, no doubt, but she called me the disgrace of Daleham and a blot on English manhood, and a red tom cat—me that have never looked at another female since I looked at her ! ’

“ ‘ 'Tis all wrong, and they'll live to find it out ; and the sooner the better for our peace of mind,’ declared Fred. ‘ And now I'm going to larn mine a sharp lesson, and I guess you'll do the like. We haven't been off the sea an hour, and I be going straight to sea again this minute. So come on.’

“ ‘ What about Ted Soper ? ’

“ ‘ Ted can stop ashore. We'll go without him. 'Tis just to larn 'em a lesson, I tell you.’

“ ‘ Anything as will do that I'm agreeable to,’ assented the other.

“ ‘God’s light! my mother-in-law’s an angel of sense compared to my wife,’ burst out Tuckett as they reached the quay. ‘Mrs. Priestley’s got more patience in her finger than Mercy have in her whole head.’

“ ‘Same with my wife’s mother; ’tis the force of age and experience in ’em. Come childer——’

“ ‘You can’t say that. Your wife’s got one.’

“ ‘One’s no use, by all accounts. One makes ’em conceited and full of airs and graces. But when they run into double figures—then the gilt’s off the gingerbread and they begin to understand what life means.’

“ ‘Talking of gingerbread, I was that savage that I flinged Mercy’s fairing on the floor and set my heel in it. A proper mess, I warn ’e! And then I got up and marched out.’

“ ‘The cocoanuts wasn’t a success, neither,’ confessed Mr. Leaman. ‘Jane asked me whether I thought she was a squirrel, to eat such trash, and I forgot myself for the minute and said I wished to God she was, because then I should know what to do with her.’

“ They walked down the quay together and met an old man called Tom Soper. He was bent and withered and very thin. His voice croaked and his matter was generally of the mournfullest. Cheerful news didn’t interest him; indeed, a lifetime of experience had taught him that it interested nobody.

“ Naught on earth be less to human nature in general than other people’s good luck, Mr. Soper once declared in a full bar, and not a man denied it.

“ Now he lifted his small and withered head and cried in a voice sad as a curlew’s.

“ ‘Have ’e heard the news, Frederick? That poor wretch, Abel Ball, have got another child. They be like thistles, they Balls be—can’t live without increasing. But I say ’tis only weeds have such a lot of childer.’

“ ‘They’m a happy couple, however,’ declared Jack Leaman. ‘Never was a pair that went better together.’

“ ‘Fools—fools and don’t know it. To breed paupers be socialism in my opinion, and something ought to be done against it.’

“ He broke off and hastened down a side street. They heard him shout to a humpbacked sailor who had just come off the sea.

“ ‘Have ’e heard the news, Samuel? That poor wretch, Abel Ball, have got another child. They be like thistles——’

“ Mr. Soper was on the quay again, however, before Fred and Jack started. He showed surprise, interest and anger to larn that they were going fishing o’ Saturday night.

“ ‘And the Lord’s day to-morrow! ’Tis men like you bring the hand of Heaven against Daleham and ruin the fishery. And when I think of the burning light by night and the pillar of cloud by day that your father was, Frederick, I’m very much surprised and shocked. And as for my grandchild, Ted Soper, I shan’t suffer him to go along in your boat no more if ’tis to be Sunday fishing.’

“ ‘The case is peculiar,’ explained Fred; ‘and I ban’t going to tell you nothing about it, Uncle Soper, because you’d croak a lot of nonsense from one end of Daleham to t’other in half an hour if I did. But we’ve a good reason for going to sea, and we don’t want Ted; and very like we shan’t drop the trawl afore Monday, if then. ’Tis private business, and there’s an end of it.’

“ ‘If you be going smuggling to France?’ began Uncle Soper.

“ Frederick Tuckett laughed.

“ ‘That’s the idea—that’ll do capital, uncle! You tell the people that me and Jack have gone to France and be

going to bring over a brave boat-load of lace and brandy and cigars.'

" 'And what will your wives say?' asked Soper.

" 'Can't tell you, as we shan't be there to know,' answered Fred.

" In an hour the men went to sea, and their 'dandy' rigged vessel, *The Provider*, stole away between the harbour heads.

" She flashed back the red light of evening from her sails and soon was gone.

" Then Uncle Soper hastened up the hill and presently marked the neighbour wives together at their cottage doors.

" Mercy talked and Jane suckled a red-haired baby.

" 'Good evening—have 'e heard the news?' he began, stretching out his eager beak and scratching his whiskers. 'That poor wretch, Abel Ball, have got another child and glories in it—the fool! And what I say is, they Balls be like thistles—can't live without increasing. But 'tis only weeds that get such a lot of childer.'

" Then Uncle Soper told them how their husbands had just set sail.

" "'Tis all wrong, and won't come to no good,' he declared. 'And you women ought to have more power over 'em. Such greed will surely over-reach itself and land 'em in trouble.'

" 'Gone to sea!' exclaimed Jane. 'Never!'

" It happened, however, that *The Provider* was now plainly visible. Both women tried to hide their concern, but they failed.

" 'We had some words,' confessed Mrs. Leaman. 'Jack went to Brixham Fair and played about with—Lord knows who, and I was angry for certain. And who wouldn't be?'

“ ‘But the milk of an angry woman is poison to her babe,’ declared Uncle Soper, pointing to the infant at Mrs. Leaman’s breast. ‘Don’t you get angry till that infant be weaned, else ’twill turn the marrow in his bones to gall and ruin his constitution. ’Twas so with me, though I’ve struggled on to seventy-six. I should be twice the man I am if my mother hadn’t been such a famous fire-brand.’

“ He went off, and Jane and Mercy looked at one another and at the vanishing boat.

“ They regarded each other, and each put a silent question and neither answered.

“ ‘ ’Tis just to trouble us and for no other reason,’ declared Mercy. ‘But I won’t be troubled, and don’t you be, Jane.’

“ ‘ Jack said that he’d so soon go into the water as not, afore he went out.’

“ ‘ Silly creature! And my Fred talked just the same nonsense. ’Tis to frighten us, and a very feeble sort of foolishness at that. But don’t you be frightened, and don’t you fret. They’ll be back with their tails between their legs come morning. ’Tis now or never with ’em, and my Aunt Susan says that a man learns more in the first year of his married life than ever afore or after; so you and me will both go on teaching ’em while ’tis the accepted time for it.’

“ But Jane was doubtful. She watched the trawler and her eyes began to grow dim. Presently she went into her home, that Mercy might not see her tears.

“ Left alone, the childless woman also drooped a bit. She remembered the last scene; her heart softened a little, and she grew sad before twilight came.

“ She had got Fred his favourite Sunday dinner.

“ In the t’other home Jane was hugging her baby and

crying about one thing while she pretended to herself that she was crying about another.

“ ‘ Did the ugly, bad old man say that mother would poison her tibby lamb, then ? Mother would rather die a thousand times than poison her li’l Johnny,’ says Jane to her baby.

“ Then Sunday came, but *The Provider* did not. Friends with good intention in some cases and mixed motives in others, called to console the young wives. They were crestfallen and sad and properly down on their luck by that time. Both feared the worst, but didn’t know what shape ’twould take.

“ On Monday night it was blowing hard, and their young eyes ached with long scanning of the waves. They slept together to hearten each other.

“ Not till Tuesday did the full measure of their trouble come, and then a man well used to the work brought it.

“ Among Uncle Soper’s virtues was early rising, and at dawn on Tuesday he stood at the quay-head watching the fleet put forth on the tide. Thus, though his aged sight could not enjoy the spectacle and promise of woe, his ears were the first to hear of it, and his legs were swift to carry the tidings where it must be least welcome.

“ Young Ted Soper, a bit troubled by the absence of *The Provider*, on which he was third hand, now scanned the sea impatiently, and presently he saw his ship returning. She approached and loomed large through the morning haze. There had blown half a gale of wind from the west since Monday morn, but to-day the sky was clear and the sea rolled smooth, with nothing but a ground swell to mark the vanished storm.

“ Then Ted made a discovery.

“ ‘ Jimmery ! She’ve got her flag half-masted, gran’-father ! ’

“ The ancient woke into life on the instant.

“ ‘ Half-mast ! Half-mast ! That means death, or at the least some terrible misfortune. Be sure you’re seeing straight, afore I carry the news like a flame of fire ! ’

“ Others said the same as Ted, and there was no doubt that *The Provider* was bringing back trouble. She crawled in very slowly on the lazy dawn wind, and Uncle Soper declared that to his eye she had a hang-dog look, as though ashamed to return to port.

“ ‘ Mark me ! ’ he said. ‘ She was caught in that heavy weather, and only them two aboard, and they’ve carried away something, and one of ’em’s been drowned ! Poor women ! Poor women ! I’ll get up over the hill this instant moment ! ’

“ ‘ Bide here ! ’ shouted a fisherman. ‘ What’s the sense of putting ’em both in a tear till we know which ’tis ? At worst ’tis only one of ’em have got to suffer. ’

“ But Uncle would not stay.

“ ‘ ’Tis better as they should both be prepared. I’m an old man, and I know wiser than you young ones, ’ he piped back.

“ Jane and Mercy were at their doors. They had seen *The Provider*, but knew not that her little flag flew at half-mast.

“ ‘ Here’s our boat coming home at last, Uncle Soper, ’ said Jane.

“ ‘ Too well I know it, my poor dears—too well I know it ! ’ he gasped. ‘ Let me catch my wind, as I’ve lost fighting the hill to break the awful news. Her flag’s flying at half-mast ! She’s bringing death—death or destruction of some sort. You mustn’t hope—there’s no call to hope. You must face it, as better than you and poorer than you have had to do. In a word, one of ’em—Fred or Jack—God He only knows which—be gone to

his watery grave. They would sail short-handed. But you——'

"He found himself alone. Mercy Tuckett was already running down the hill, and Jane, staying to dart indoors and shut the door on her sleeping child, followed.

"Uncle felt regretful that he had made such speed, but set off after them again as quickly as possible. He hoped to be back on the quay afore *The Provider's* boat came ashore.

"The old man was just in time. *The Provider's* dinghy had arrived, and she brought the dust of a dead man with her and two living ones.

"Two wives sobbed on two men's bosoms while they told how the cod of *The Provider's* trawl had caught and brought back to light a corpse.

"'Tis poor Luke Sweet—him as slipped over the side of *The Good Hope* a month agone,' explained Mr. Tuckett. 'Us only knowed him by his boots.'

"'He'd far better have bided at the bottom of the sea,' declared Uncle Soper. 'For Christian burial's out of the question now. 'Tis well known he took his own life, because Annie Westerbrook hadn't got no use for him; and 'twill be a very indecent act and a premium on sin if parson puts him under with "sure and certain."'

"But Uncle only spoke thus because he was secretly annoyed that not a soul in Daleham could by any possibility be the sadder concerning this matter of the friendless Luke Sweet.

"And Jack and Jane and Fred and Mercy went home close together."

CAPTAIN BARKER'S BELL

CAPTAIN BARNER'S BELL

TALKING about the flag at half-mast story reminded Johnny Rowland of another that came from the same place, and as none of us knowed much about the sea nor the people as dwelt thereby, we hadn't chanced upon the tale.

The master of 'The Plume' knew Daleham, himself, having been there to see his uncle time and again when a young youth. So he was able to put the tale afore us very clever. And the yarn was true also, because it had come straight from Rowland's own uncle George.

"The churchyard of Daleham," began Johnny, "have got a good few queer stones and sayings in it, like all such places, but I never heard of nothing so queer as the old story about the sailor's grave. And yet, when you come to read about it, or list to the tale in the mouth of some ancient party, it do sound all as natural as life and too strange not to be true. For there be a lot of hidden things as go on as regular as open things, and wonders lie under every stone, if we had but the senses to understand 'em. But there 'tis. Though gifted with but five senses, we never think there can be anything in earth or air beyond their power to root out and explain; whereas what I say is this: I'll swap the whole five for common-sense, and common-sense will very soon tell you that much happens every hour and moment that t'other senses can't make top nor tail of. For why? They weren't meant to do it. We

haven't got a sense in our blessed bodies that be fashioned to tell us the truth about ghosts and such-like spectrums ; and the cleverest chaps nowadays, so I be told, are all coming round to the opinion that only a fool laughs at what his wits can't reach to.

“ There was a time when ghosts was under a cloud, so parson tells me, but of late several terrible learned men have gone into the matter and called up ghosts in their spare hours ; so, of course, us common people have no right or reason to doubt. And for my part, I say that, what with flying in the air and travelling under water, and wireless messages and all the rest of the marvellous things that be convulsing Nature, to believe in trifles like ghostes didn't ought to tax the power of any man.

“ Not that Captain Barker ever walked himself, but there 'tis—his bones must have kept something in 'em after he went underground, because 'tis well known you can't have a sound without a cause ; and if a bell rings, 'tis a truth within the reach of a child that somebody or something have rung it. Though, again, you might say you can't have a bell ringing if there ban't no bell to ring, and the ring of a bell without a bell be just as much a ghost as the shape of a man without a man. So that what we come to be the ghost of a sound, which could reach the human ear so easy as the ghost of a sight could reach the human eye.

“ Be that as it will, somewhere in the reign of George I., or sooner, when the village of Daleham was a mere hamlet of fifty cottages or thereabout, a ship at the dead of night drove on the Devil's Teeth, that ugly ridge of rocks pointing due south to the west side of the bay. There wasn't no rocket apparatus then, and, owing to the big sea running at the time, a boat was not to be thought upon. So there she lay, and strong men not a hundred and fifty

yards off on the cliffs was as powerless to help as though they'd been in the Midlands.

"A boat they had on the ship, however, and as there was nothing for it but that or certain death, the poor chaps got to work to launch her. There was ten in all, and them ashore could see by lightning light what they was up to. On the very hour of midnight they started, and none too soon, for their ship was breaking up under their feet. Then, in a bit of darkness between two flaps of lightning, the shore folk heard the ship's bell clear and solemn. Eight bells she tolled—the hour of midnight—and when the sky was light again, boat and ship alike were gone, and they heard the screams of the dying rise higher than the shout of wind and wave.

"One man alone came ashore alive, and, strangely enough but one corpse followed him. 'Twas a seaman by the name of McBean who escaped and survived the night, while the dead man, as was washed into harbour next day, chanced to be one Matthew Barker, the skipper of the poor ship.

"And McBean, when he comed to his senses after they'd emptied the water out of him, told how of course the captain was the last to leave, and how, just afore he stepped into the boat, being a terrible hand for discipline, if he didn't strike eight bells, while t'others was hanging on for dear life and expecting to be stove in every moment! And stove in they was, according to McBean. Anyway, the skipper never came aboard, but the ship broke and overwhelmed 'em; and how 'twas McBean got clear of the ruin, and managed to reach shore alive, he didn't pretend to know or explain.

"Well, they buried Barker by the churchyard gate, and lifted some good rough-hewn granite and raised a heavy square tomb over the man, and told all about him and his perished ship upon it. You can read it yet, if your eyes

be sharp enough, when the sun's setting, though at midday the words are gone.

"And the time passed, and then a young sailor-man by the name of Foster went through the yard by night. 'Twas a short cut to the public-house, and Foster come in the bar of 'The Three Jolly Sailors' so white as curds a minute later. He couldn't steady for a bit, then he said :

" 'Captain Barker ! Captain Barker ! Oh, my God ! Captain Barker ! ' "

"That didn't help things much, so they gived the man a dram ; and when he could talk straight, he said as he was going through the graveyard, and had just marked the moonlight silvering the stones of the dead, when, all of a sudden, out of Captain Barker's grave he heard a mournful, muffled bell toll out the midnight hour.

" 'Then the dead man's a liar,' said Jack Best, 'for it ban't gone ten o'clock yet.' "

" 'You can't blame him for not knowing the time to a minute,' answered another chap. But some took it serious, though some laughed, and a party of a dozen went off there and then to see if Barker would ring again. But he didn't. 'Twas all moony and silent in the burying-ground, and not a beetle stirring, let alone the poor sailor-man. The folk made light of it, and 'twas almost forgot till six months after. Then came the shocking news of poor Foster's death. He got knocked overboard in bad weather, going round the Horn, and the awful thing was that the gert, starving sea-birds fastened upon him afore he sank and pecked his living eyes out of his head. But that was hid from his poor mother, for t'would have been enough to drive her mad to hear it.

"After that, of course, every doubter well knew that

Foster must have heard Captain Barker's bell, and it looked as clear as anything could look that if a body heard it, he was a goner inside the year. And so the people got to feel a sort of dislike of the tomb, and none would care to be round that way after nightfall, and, as a short cut to 'The Three Jolly Sailors,' the churchyard went out of fashion altogether.

"That's how it stood, and there was other tales of people as had heard the bell, and had passed away pretty soon after doing so. But no story could be proved so certain as Foster's, and some thinkers amongst the folk reckoned that the miracle only happened for sailors, and some, on the contrary, believed it held good for landsmen and, in fact, any human creature.

"Then fell out the matter of Nancy Turtle and Bill Reep and Samuel Voysey. 'Twas just the everyday thing of two men after one maid, and her doubtful between 'em. For Bill had good work and was a teetotaler, and sang in the choir at church, and was homely of face, and Samuel had a rich uncle, and a very clever tongue and curly hair, and a way with the girls. Nancy's people was set on William by reason of his high character, and Nancy herself liked him very well, and believed most steadfast that he'd wear and make her a good loving husband. But when t'other came along, Bill Reep faded away, and Sam's dashing talk and love-making left Nancy in two minds again. She was a thoughtful girl for twenty-two, and she knowed well 'twas against reason and nature to keep the pair of 'em hanging on for ever. But owing to her weakness, some thought, and owing to her fair and open mind, as she put it herself, she found a very great deal of difficulty in fixing which 'twas to be.

"They both worked at her with a will, for both was in

deadly earnest, and the battle was watched with no small interest by a lot of young men. I dare say a dozen had tried and failed afore them, because Nancy was a beauty and worth offering for. But though more than one farmer had wanted her, and even a schoolmaster, with sixty pound a year and great prospects, had tried to win her, she'd nought to say to them but 'No.' And one man died of it, 'twas whispered, though, happening to know the fool, my uncle was in a position to say he did no such thing. He got drunk one night at 'The Three Jolly Sailors,' and offered to swallow a tobacco stopper for a wager. And he done it and won the bet, but died a week after, because the tobacco stopper stopped him; and he was gone, like the dew on the fleece, though not until three doctors had cut him to ribbons.

"There was a bit of money on Nancy Turtle's lovers among the lookers-on, and my uncle got so much as twelve shilling put up to back Reep. But you could get two to one about him, whereas with Samuel the betting was evens for six months; and then a man, as appeared to know, began to give odds on him. It turned out that he'd seen Nancy and Sam Voysey out walking after dark; and his arm was around her at the time, and her head back on his shoulder. But the chap didn't mention that till long after.

"Then Nancy changed her mind a bit, seemingly, and was seen out walking by day with William; and then 'twas given out she'd took William. And then, afore you could look round, Sam Voysey's brother, who was in the know, as we supposed, swore that Sam had got her. Some wonderful sporting books was made upon it, and afore the end everybody stood to be ruined which ever way it went.

"Then it was that Sam's brother—a friend of my Uncle

George—let him into a bit of a secret, and but for that accident I dare say 'twould all have turned out very different from what it did do. But Sam hadn't larned, seemingly, that a man in love can't keep his secrets too close, and he told his younger brother what was afoot, and on a Saturday night he told my uncle.

“ ‘Tis like this,’ he said. ‘That girl have made up her mind at last. She’s promised Will Reep in a weak moment ; but now Samuel have set on to her in earnest, and she feels that he’s the man and only him. But the thing for her to do is to know how to be fairly and squarely off with Reep, because she don’t pretend she don’t like Reep very well, and she’s very wishful to let him down as gently as it can be done.’

“ ‘Tis a nice mess she be in, and I’m glad I’m not the man to get her out of it,’ said my uncle.

“ ‘But Sam’s the man, and along of his terrible cleverness he’ve struck the very thing,’ answered young Nicholas Voysey.

“ ‘And what may that be?’ asked uncle.

“ ‘Why, ’tis for Nancy to go in the churchyard and hear Captain Barker’s bell,’ he says, grinning all over his bacon face. ‘You see, she be going to spend to-morrow evening along with they Marydrews to Nut Cottage, and she’s going to bide there so late as she can, and then she’s coming back along through the churchyard. After that she’s going to rush home in an awful stew, and say as she’s heard the doom bell, and must be gone inside the year.’

“ ‘Then, of course, Reep won’t have no more use for her,’ said Uncle George.

“ ‘Of course he won’t—him least of all, for he’s of a very religious turn of mind, and believes in the bell just so certain as he believes in the Bible. So he’ll be off, and

Sam will come along and be very grand and lover-like, and say *he* don't care for fifty bells, and then she'll take him.'

" 'But Sam believes in the bell, too.'

" 'Of course he do. What's that matter? There won't be no bell, really.'

" ' 'Tis a case of all's fair in love and war,' said uncle to Nicholas.

" 'That's just what it is,' he answered. 'And by the same token I swore to Sam to keep this quiet as death, so I hope you'll do the like.'

" 'Be sure I shall,' uncle told him. 'And you get home now and go to bed afore you let it out to any person else.'

" He took the advice and went. Of course, he didn't know my uncle would lose twelve bob if his brother got Nancy, or else he wouldn't have told him the shameful plot. But there 'twas, and after the public-house shut, Uncle George went home and felt very restless on account of William Reep. 'Twas one of them cruel rare cases when duty and interest seemed to be on the same side; and yet, you see, he'd promised young Voysey not to say a word on the subject; and he never lied, and never meant to, under any temptation whatever.

" Well, he thought upon it half the night, and about dawn he saw it. Like a flash it came, as all great ideas do come; and he rose up and stuck his head in a basin of water, and went forth into the Sabbath morning, for there wasn't no time to be lost.

" Sunday passed off much as usual, and Uncle George was standing at his gate somewhere very near midnight, taking the air and watching the moon sailing through a rack of soft summer cloud, when who should come by but young Nicholas Voysey.

“ ‘Hullo, Nick! What be you so busy about at this late hour?’ he asked.

“ ‘Can’t stop, can’t stop! There’s a shocking thing happened,’ answered Nick.

“ But he did stop all the same.

“ ‘I can tell you,’ he said, ‘and you be the only man as I can tell, come to think of it. ’Tis like this. Me and Sam strolled over to the Turtles’ a bit ago, to see Nancy when she comed home, and hear her tell her old people about the bell. And we was there in the kitchen, and Sam was just going off to meet Nancy on her way, when in she flew in a frightful state of mind. Shaking at the knees she was, and her eyes very near popping out of her head, and her hat all o’ one side.

“ ‘ ‘My stars! there’s wonnerful play-acting!’ ” whispers Samuel to me. But I didn’t think as it could be—too awful life-like for that. And it wasn’t; ’twas all real.

“ ‘ ‘I’ve heard Captain Barker’s bell! I’ve heard Cap’n Barker’s bell!’ ” she moaned out, and flinged herself on her mother’s bosom in a passion of weeping. Then Sam, thinking to calm her down, goes over to comfort her; but she turned upon him and screamed, and said ’twas all his fault, and that her days were numbered. And so it turned out that the poor creature really had heard the thing!

“ ‘She got a bit calmer presently, and her father fetched her some brandy, for her teeth was chattering like a mill. Then, when she’d catched a bit of heat and growed easier, she told as how she was just nipping through the church-yard so quick as she could, when from the heart of the tomb comed a muffled bell-stroke, and it froze her legs under her and very nearly dropped her where she stood. Eight times she heard it, and then all was still. How she kept from fainting she couldn’t say, but she got off somehow and oped

the lich-gate, and then ran half a mile down the lane to home.

“ ‘ She was in a proper gashly stew over it, poor wretch, and presently she went off in ’sterics, while her father talked. And then I said as I’d go and get Doctor Westcott ; and now I’m going to do it.’

“ ‘ This be awful bad news indeed,’ Uncle George told Nicholas. ‘ She’ll want a brave man to stand by her now, poor girl, for thicky bell was never known to lie. ’Tis a plot returning on the head of the plotter. How do Samuel take it ? ’

“ ‘ I haven’t had no speech with him, but I lay he’ll be off her. You can’t keep company with a female booked for the grave. ’Twould be most indecent,’ said Nick Voysey.

“ With that he went on his way, and afore noon the next morning ’twas all over Daleham that poor Nancy Turtle had heard Captain Barker’s bell, and her hours were numbered.

“ Uncle let the news work like wildfire through the village, and went his road as usual and did his work, which was that of postman and other things beside. And then, towards the evening, he took a little parcel as he’d got ready, and went down over to have a talk with William Reep.

“ William Reep was wonderful cheerful, all things considered, and not much astonished to see Uncle George, for he’d paid the man a visit the morning afore, and borrowed something he was known to possess.

“ ‘ A nice evening, Bill,’ said my uncle.

“ ‘ A very nice evening, indeed,’ answered Bill. ‘ Us begin saving the hay to-morrow.’

“ ‘ And you’ll have something else to do also,’ said uncle, just to see how he’d take it.

“ ‘ I’ve done that a’ready,’ he replied.

“ ‘ You was a bit surprised when I comed over yesterday morn to borrow this old dinner-bell, as you got to the jumble sale at the schoolroom last winter, wasn't you ? ’ uncle asked the mañ.

“ ‘ Yes, I was, ’ he answered.

“ Then the bell was handed back to him.

“ ‘ But you ban't so much astonished now, I lay ? ’ asked Uncle George.

“ ‘ No, I ban't. ’

“ ‘ 'Tis a very good bell, ’ continued uncle, ‘ and if you muffle up the clapper in a bit of cotton-wool, it do make a very mournful sound, William. ’

“ ‘ Thank you, neighbour, ’ answered Bill, and then he shook my uncle's hand very warmly. ‘ I shan't forget you had occasion to borrow the bell, my dear, and I hope I'll be able to do you as good a turn some day as what you've done me. ’

“ Uncle was going without more words, when William volunteered a bit of news. And some of the things that he said the other knew a'ready, and some he did not know.

“ ‘ There was a deed o' darkness done yesternight, ’ said Will. ‘ Poor Nancy went in the graveyard to please that hookem-snivey rip, Samuel Voysey, who's been running after her of late. And there was a plot hatched against my peace of mind. And now 'tis the other way round, because she's got a fancy that she *did* hear the bell, you see, and she thinks she be going to die. ’

“ ‘ Of course, Samuel will stick up for her, all the same, ’ answered Uncle George.

“ ‘ No, ’ said Reep, ‘ that's just what Samuel will not do. He's off her. ’

“ ‘ Like they rats as be known to leave a sinking ship, ’ suggested my uncle.

“ ‘ Exactly so,’ he replied. ‘ But ’t isn’t like that with me. I scorned the silly nonsense, and told Nancy that we’d sink or swim together, and declared that none with a pinch of pluck would give a moment’s heed to such trash. And there ’tis—she’ll not change her mind no more. And parson’s my side also, and, in a word, the banns be going up Sunday fortnight.’

“ ‘ That’s a brave man,’ said Uncle George to him. ‘ You give the girl something better to think about than dying.’

“ And he did so, and they were married inside two months from that day. My uncle made twenty-four shillings by it, whether or no. And the cruel funny thing was that, instead of dying afore the year was out, Nancy had got a brave babby—a cheel the living daps of herself.

“ And the tale got out, of course, but not till she’d taken Reep. Then ’twas all over the place how the plot had come to Uncle George’s ear, and how he’d done a clever deed, and how Will had put his two and two together and read it. For, mind you, Uncle never let out Samuel’s secret. ’Twas Nancy herself told William at the same time she told him she was going to die.

“ And the upshot was queer, too, for along of this bit of fun, people took to slighting Captain Barker’s grave a good bit, and laughing at it, and passing it by night to get to ‘ The Three Jolly Sailors,’ as they did in the old days. In fact, they began to treat it just as if the Captain’s tomb was a common, everyday sort o’ grave.

“ But my uncle didn’t hold with that at all. He declared that vartue was in it still ; and though he used the mystery in the cause of right and justice, for the purpose of giving Bill Reep a lift, and helping himself to win four-and-twenty shillings—all in a straight and lawful manner—yet

that was no reason why the people should think any less respectful of Captain Barker's bell.

“ ‘ Some day, no doubt, 'twill toll again in earnest for some night-foundered creature, and then us shall all get to treat it with proper respect once more,’ said Uncle George to me when he told the story in my young ears.”

THE ROPE

THE ROPE

WE was talking about what sort of man be the most useful to the world at large, and Nat Bradley—being that kind himself—thought the gentle, easy-going fashion of people did best.

“They be like oil in the bearings,” he said; “they calm down the heat and cool the friction, and help to make the world comfortable.”

But I withstood him.

“’Tis the hard sort, and not the soft, do the work of the earth,” I said. “Softness breeds softness, and if we was all of your stamp, Nathaniel, the nation would go down. These ban’t days to offer the other cheek, and a grabber like England will never meet those days,” I told the man. “Us have to stand shoulder to shoulder, and the sort we want ban’t the easy-going kind, who like for everybody to please themselves, but the hard, fighting hearts that scorn comfort and luxury, but be eaten up with glory. ’Tis a very remarkable fact that some of the greatest men have never known, or wanted to know, what comfort was.”

“’Twas the lack of it that drove ’em into the world and caused ’em to make their mark, no doubt,” answered Nat. “And my experience is that the uncomfortable sort be always seeking how to make other people uncomfortable also. And you mustn’t think, Thomas Turtle, that they blustering chaps, with their drums and banners and Empire Days and Primrose Days, and all the whole bag of tricks,

will finish up top, because they won't; and I've got the Word to prove it. 'Tis the meek will inherit the earth, and if that's not a nail in the coffin of England, tell me what is."

"I don't like for to hear you running down England, Nat," said old Harry Hawke.

And then we all fell on Nat Bradley about his ideas, and he turned nasty at last, and said if we could go one better than the Bible, we was a cleverer lot than he'd ever believed, and that he'd never know'd his luck living amongst us so many years.

'Twas then that Johnny Rowland, from behind his bar, in a very clever way brought the subject back to the starting-place, and said that, for his part, he wasn't sure whether the peace-makers was to be envied always.

"They've got their consciences o' their side, no doubt," said Johnny; "but human nature's a weak mixture, and often though your conscience may pat you on the back, nobody else will. 'Tis a very ungrateful world, and yet human nature never gets used to ingratitude. And if we busy ourselves for other people, we must do it with our eyes open, and take the hard knocks we often get for our trouble."

"Yet there's a lot of kindness about, I'm sure," said Peter Gurney, the farrier. "Look at my brother, Harry, the postman. He's just had to retire, being very near seventy year old now, and not so peart as he was; and he's walked Heaven knows how many thousand miles for the Post Office; and they've made him a presentation of a purse with twenty-five sovereigns in it, and a plated kettle for his missis. No need at all to do any such thing, of course—just out of human kindness 'twas done."

"Yes," said Farmer Jim Mumford, our crusty member, "and if all I hear be true, the man as worked hardest to

get up that testimonial, and collected the subscriptions, and bothered the people to give, and wouldn't take 'No' for an answer, was Harry Gurney hisself. I may be wrong, but so I've been told."

We shouted shame on Jim Mumford at that, and Peter Gurney lost his temper, and said that, for the price of half a pint, he'd pull Farmer's nose.

"And not the fust to do it neither!" he said. "For we all know what Moses Butt done to you in the 'seventies. And well you deserved it. Gave you his whip-end to the truth of moosic he did—lathered you in the open street till you yowled for mercy. And you've forgot that lesson seemingly, and 'tis time as you had another. You be a hatch-mouthed, profane swearer, and you've never no good to say of man, woman, or mouse, and—and if 'twasn't for these people here and your grey hairs, I'd break your neck!"

"Besides all that," went on Peter, "wasn't you great-nephew to a man as ought to have been hanged, and would have been but for an accident?"

But then Rowland took him up, and killed two birds with one stone, according to his custom; for not only did he silence the row and calm us down, but he told the true story of Farmer Jim Mumford's grandmother's brother.

"You be utterly wrong," he said to Peter Gurney, "and I wonder how any man at this time of day haven't got that tale right; and 'tis nothing but your anger excuses you. Tom West, the chap you be telling about—— However, since you don't know the tale, you shall have it."

Farmer Jim spoke then. He finished his drink and flung his cusses out like a hailstorm, caring not who might be smote by 'em. Then he went out of the bar, but not afore he'd told Johnny Rowland that he'd never, never come in it no more; and Johnny, who little liked the man, made answer that he might do as he pleased in that matter, and

that, if he bided away, 'twas quite certain the world would still go on.

After that we settled to the tale.

“ 'Tis of a strange and a creepy chap by the name of Gregory Merdle that I be going to tell,” began Johnny, “ and first we see the man at the end of a journey, dog-tired and very near ready for bed. Travelling was travelling in the old days, and Gregory Merdle's eye began to blink, for the coach journey from Bristol to Exeter had taken a good many hours, and 'twas winter weather, and a good fire and a good supper had made him terrible sleepy. But his day wasn't done yet, as you'll hear.

“ The remains of supper lay on the table of the room that he had engaged ; his bed was in the corner and his box stood beside it. A brave fire burned, and Mr. Merdle, who had took off his shoes, stretched out a pair of big feet to the blaze, puffed a ' churchwarden,' and stared at a kettle which hummed upon the hob. He was a huge chap, fifty year old or thereabout, with a massive neck, a bullet head, and a clean-shaved face, whereof the chin was the mightiest member. A fighting head, you might have called it, and, indeed, Gregory in his younger days had shone in the ring, and taken his place as victor or vanquished in fourteen fights to a finish. But Mr. Belcher settled Gregory's claims in the P. R., and left the mark of a champion of England's genius on his mug in the shape of a broken nose. Yet the old prize-fighter's look was kindly ; his eyes twinkled, and his mouth, though pretty large, was easy and framed for laughter as well as victuals.

“ ‘ I'll have my night-cap and get to bed, ma'am,' he said to Jane Hatch, the landlady, who entered to remove his supper tray. ‘ I be that sleepy, along with my cold journey on the coach, that 'tis all I can do to keep awake, Mrs. Hatch.’

“ She regarded the man with reverent fear, and her eyes was round when she looked upon him.

“ ‘ Yes, Mr. Merdle, sir ; no doubt, you be in the right, sir. When do it happen, if I may ax ? ’

“ ‘ Eleven o’clock, on Heavitree Hill, ma’am. And I take the Plymouth coach at half after two in the afternoon, and hope to get down there in time for supper.’

“ ‘ Yes, Mr. Merdle, sir. All Exeter will be there to see.’

“ ‘ No doubt the people will be there to see, as you say. I get bigger crowds than the players or the parsons—more shame to human nature. And when ’tis over, I shall just come back along here to pick a bone, and then I’ll carry my box to the coach.’

“ ‘ What will I get you for breakfast, Mr. Merdle, sir ? ’ she asks.

“ ‘ For breakfast I’ll have a pound of sausages and a pint of beer, Mrs. Hatch. Let ’em be served sharp at seven. I must get up the hill betimes to see as everything be in order.’

“ ‘ Us have got a nice lot of black-pudden going just now,’ ventures the woman, and he considered a bit afore he answered :

“ ‘ There’s nothing this side the grave my wife do love better’n black-pudden. If you can sell me a pound, I’ll take ’em back home to Bristol with me next week.’

“ ‘ So I will, then, Mr. Merdle, sir,’ she says. ‘ A pound and a bit over you shall have.’

“ ‘ Good night, then. Breakfast at seven sharp, mind. I shall be ready for it. And take my shoes and give ’em a clean.’

“ ‘ Yes, Mr. Merdle, sir.’

“ With that the landlady departed. Of course, she was itching to talk a little more concerning the big man’s

business ; but she dared not, for he weren't one as you could make talk against his will.

“ Then Mr. Merdle poured out his nightcap of ‘ four fingers,’ squeezed in half a lemon, added sugar, filled up with boiling water, and set the grog to keep hot by the fire. He finished his pipe, flung it in the fender, and filled and lit another, which he took from a box on the chest of drawers. He puffed and breathed heavily, sipped his drink, and spread his enormous hands to the fire.

“ A church clock struck ten, and then the silence of the little alley of Cathedral Yard was broken. The visitor heard a knock at the street door below and two women's voices.

“ ‘ I must see him—the gentleman that come by the coach ! ’ cries one.

“ ‘ You can't ; he's gone to bed, my dear woman,’ answers t'other.

“ ‘ No matter for that ; he can get up again. 'Twill pay him well to do so,’ says the first. ‘ See him I will ! ’

“ ‘ Be that a babby you've got there ? ’ asks the landlady.

“ ‘ Yes, 'tis, then, wi' king's evil, poor little chap ! ’ And that threw a bit of light on the matter for Mrs. Hatch.

“ ‘ I see. Well, he's a terrible kind gentleman. I dare say as he'll see you if he ban't asleep a'ready. I know he strikes for it,’ she answered.

“ ‘ Life or death may hang upon him, and, if you're a mother, you'll understand,’ says the first, while the other granted as much.

“ ‘ Life or death be in his hand, no doubt,’ admitted Mrs. Hatch. And a moment later she ran upstairs and knocked at her lodger's door. He bade her enter.

“ ‘ Please, Mr. Merdle, sir——’ she began, but the man stopped her.

“ ‘I heard,’ he said. ‘You can send the creature up. I know what she wants.’

“A moment later a woman bustled in and shut the door behind her. She was a handsome girl of twenty, with a strong and resolute face, black hair, and black eyes. But she was very pale, and evidently suffering from great trouble of mind. She looked like one who had been through all sorts of torments, and had pretty well reached the end of her strength and her self-control. It was clear that the sight of Mr. Merdle caused her to feel terrible queer. In fact, for half a minute she stared at him without speaking; and then it seemed that a sudden fit of faintness overcame her, for she put her free hand to her forehead and sank down all of a sudden. Luckily the bed was behind her, and she sat upon it.

“ ‘Take care of the warming-pan, ma’am!’ said Mr. Merdle. ‘’Tis the child you be come about, no doubt? The usual thing, I suppose. I strike for it—the king’s evil—but I always tell them as want it done that I don’t promise a cure. ’Tis a mystery, and I can’t tell how it works.’

“ ‘I’ve known more than one little child cured by it,’ she answered him, ‘and I’ve got a golden sovereign for ’e, sir. ’Tis all I can afford, and I hope you’ll let it do.’

“Mr. Merdle was a good bit surprised at the extent of the sum, for five shillings represented his usual charge, and twenty shillings was quite out of the common.

“ ‘Well, that’s good,’ he says. ‘You don’t seem very peart yourself, by the look of you. But I’ll mix a pinch of spirits for ’e. Better still, have a pull at mine. You’re a fine girl seemingly, and ’tis a pity your babby’s sick,’

“She laid her child on Mr. Merdle’s bed without waking it. Then she brought a piece of paper from her pocket, opened it, and fetched out a sovereign.

“ ‘Take it and welcome,’ she said. ‘I hope you’ll do my little boy good, and, be it as it will, you can’t do him no harm, can you?’

“ ‘Certainly not,’ declared Mr. Merdle, putting the sovereign in his pocket. ‘The world be full of things beyond our human knowledge, and if the wisdom of men has decreed that striking or stroking a babby with a hangman’s rope be like to cure it of its ills, then who be I to say it don’t? Sip at this here.’

“He handed her his glass, and she drank eagerly, swallowed a few mouthfuls, and then coughed. Mr. Merdle had turned his back and gone to the box by the bed. He laughed at her discomfort.

“ ‘A bit strong for a young woman! But it won’t hurt ’e. And who might your husband be, now?’

“To this question she did not reply, but suddenly burst out on what looked to be quite another matter.

“ ‘This here chap, Tom West, as you be going to choke to-morrow—he’s innocent as that babby there! Afore Heaven he’s innocent, hangman!’

“Mr. Merdle had knelt down beside his box, taken a key from his pocket, and opened the little wooden trunk. In it were black clothes, a tight-fitting black cap, a mask, and a coil of rope. The last he brought out now and flung down upon the table. It seemed to twine and coil like a serpent, and the woman shivered and stared at it as though, snake-like, the hemp had bewitched her.

“She just stared and said nought.

“ ‘Feel it,’ said the man. ‘’Tis more like silk than hemp—my own twining—a merciful thing—for I be a very merciful creature, and don’t give one pang more than Nature asks for. I’ll use no rope but what I spin myself—I’ll trust none but mine. Feel it; it almost melts in your hand, you might say.’

“Gregory was terrible proud of his rope, you see, but, after the first shock, the woman didn't seem to take much account of it.

“‘He's innocent,’ she said again, ‘innocent afore Heaven. There's a man in Exeter this minute that bore false witness; everybody but the judge and jury was positive of it. Tom West no more stole they sheep than you did.’

“Mr. Merdle shrugged his shoulders.

“‘I ban't called upon to meddle with that,’ he answered. ‘The Law in its might have tried him all in order, and found him guilty. My part be only to carry out the sentence of the Law. The man's life's in Higher Hands. Be it likely that Heaven would let the innocent perish? I don't believe it, ma'am. And sure I am—so sure as Heaven be all justice—that I never yet turned off an innocent creature, male or female, and never shall.’

“The woman was thinking her private thoughts, and did not answer for a good minute.

“‘I know his wife,’ she said. ‘Mrs. West will die if they put him away. However, as you tell me, it ban't your business to trouble about that.’

“‘'Tis my merciful part to end a doomed man's life so swift and quick as can be,’ he told her, ‘and that string there will do it. Ten souls it have sent to their Heavenly Judge in an instant moment, and if so be as they could have come back to do it, I doubt not that one and all would have sworn that it was no more than sneezing.’

“She picked up the rope and examined it. Her fingers shook a good bit while she done this, but she ran the string through them, and noted how suent¹ and pliable it was.

“‘'Twould cling terrible close,’ she whispered.

“‘So it would, ma'am,’ he said, ‘and so it do. The

¹ Soft.

knot runs like this, and I tie it inside twelve seconds. Then the man's opening his eyes in eternity afore you can say "Amen!"

"'You never make a mistake nor bungle it, sir?' she asked.

"'Never,' answered the hangman. 'When I feel my nerve be like to fail me, then I shall go into a different walk of life and give it up. 'Tis sad work, but it have got to be done, and so 'tis well to have a superior sort of man as can do it masterly and swift and merciful. That's what I always say, and none can deny it.'

"She nodded and held up the rope.

"'You won't let me take this away for my little one? 'Tis very well to strike it; but there's a stronger charm than that—for the child to wear the rope till the ill leaves him.'

"'No, no, I can't part with the rope,' he told her. 'I want it to-morrow to Plymouth, and the next day down to Bodmin. I have others so good as this up home to Bristol, but not here. If I stroke the child's body all over, 'tis all that need be done. So I'd best set about it.'

"Just then the babby on the bed yawned and stretched, and Gregory Merdle, who had children of his own and liked them very well, turned to the little thing, held out his finger, and stroked its cheek. The child, waking happily, laughed at him. Then he picked it up, and was well pleased to find hisself treated in such a friendly spirit. To the fire he took him, and opened the blanket and took off the infant's clothes.

"'Why, there's nought the matter with your boy, ma'am!' he cries out the next minute. 'The toad's as clean and pink as a fresh shrimp! There ain't a blemish on him—a fine, fat rascal! And don't he take to me!'

"'Dad—dad—dad—dad!' cried the babby, little

thinking, poor fool, that this very man was going to put his father out o' life in twelve hours' time.

" 'Go along with you! You don't want no hangman's rope, you brave chap!' says Mr. Merdle, rubbing his great chin against the child's cheek.

" Then he turned his head to look at the mother, and ax her what the mischief she'd come for to waste her money and his time.

" But she had vanished. In a word, Sarah, the wife of Tom West, the condemned man, was clean gone; and she had taken the hangman's rope with her—and left her babby!

" Mr. Merdle saw his fix in a moment, and dropped the infant on his bed, and hurried to the door.

" 'Stop that woman!' he bawled in a voice that shook the little house; and upon that Mrs. Hatch she rushed up from below. But she was too late: the front door hung wide, and the visitor had sped away into the night.

" Feared out of his little life by so much noise and disturbance, the sheepstealer's babby set up loud shrieks; but his mother never heard 'em, for she was already out of earshot.

" 'She's fled, Mr. Merdle, sir!' gasped out Jane Hatch. 'And, good powers, what be that? Have she left her little one?'

" 'Pick the nipper up and quiet him, and fetch me my shoon this instant moment,' ordered Mr. Merdle. 'This be a very serious matter—more so than it looks, ma'am; for without that rope I can't hang Tom West to-morrow. My other ropes be in Bristol, and the man's six foot high and weighs fourteen stone; so I don't trust him to no common hemp, be sure. I must get over to the prison afore any time be wasted. 'Tis a plot against the Law, and thicky woman have got to be caught as quick as possible.'

“ ‘ I’ll lay my life she’s the wife of the man ! ’ cried Mrs. Hatch. ‘ I seed her name in the papers. She’s been fighting proper for her husband’s life, and wearying all the quality from the Bishop of Exeter downward ; but everybody have turned a deaf ear to her.’

“ The hangman thought upon that while he pulled on his shoes.

“ ‘ A brave and a clever creature,’ he said, ‘ but a woman can’t come between a sinner and his doom in this fashion. She’s put herself in the power of the Law now, and will have to answer for it.’

“ Five minutes afterwards Mr. Merdle was on his way to Exeter Gaol, while Mrs. Hatch comforted the babby. Then Gregory told his story, and learned of Mrs. West’s great and useless efforts on behalf of her husband.

“ ‘ The evidence was circumstantial, but he had a fair trial, and no doubt exists that he committed the crime,’ said the governor of the prison. ‘ His wife’s responsible for this, of course. She shall be sought immediately.’

“ And before dawn a couple of night watchmen found Sarah West sound asleep in her own house. Worn out she was, no doubt, but they soon fetched her along to the gaol ; and when she was brought there, she made no bones about her little plot.

“ ‘ ‘Tis all a frantic wretch could do for him,’ she said. ‘ None will listen, none will give heed ; and I know, as well as I know I’m his wife, that my man didn’t do it. ’Twas a fellow-labourer with Tom, but none can prove the truth against him. And I went to see this gentleman last night, and took my babby to be struck, just for an excuse. Because I thought a wife might touch his heart, for ’tis well known he be called “ The Gentle Hangman.” And he was very kind, but couldn’t give no hope ; and then when I seed the rope, a witty thought flashed in me to run

away with it. Of course, I knowed my babby was safe enough. And that's how 'tis. And if you chopped me to pieces, I wouldn't tell you where that rope be, kind sirs !'

"She was firm about it, and so was Mr. Merdle. She wouldn't tell where she'd hid it, and he wouldn't use no other. And two days would have to pass before he could send or go all the way to Bristol for another of his professional ropes, twined by hisself.

"'I'd best to return for it in person,' he said to the gaol folk ; 'and I'm sure I do hope as the majesty of the Law won't do nothing very bad against this poor woman. She's the man's wife, and her wits have gived him another forty-eight hours in the land of the living. And who shall blame her ? I don't, though this means two more journeys for me than I counted on. However, my wife will get her black-pudden all the sooner. 'Tis an ill wind that bloweth good to none.'

"'Your brave rope be safe enough, hangman,' says Mrs. West. 'But Heaven's my judge—it shan't strangle my husband !'

"So it fell out that the execution was a lot delayed, and a turnkey informed the condemned man that his last morning on earth was not yet come. He heard all the particulars also, but he did not bless his wife.

"'Poor, dear fool, she meant well,' said Tom West, 'but what for ? Two more of these days ban't no good to me. My peace be made. I'm innocent afore God, and the thief knows it. And his name be Ned Rivers, and his time will come in the next world if not in this. And the sooner I'm put away, the better for all parties.'

"Nevertheless, when Mr. Merdle returned to Exeter two nights later, and went back to his old room at the house of Jane Hatch, a woman very near mad with joy waited for him, and his wonderful rope was there also.

“ ‘ Not again, ma’am ! ’ he said.

“ ‘ Hast heard the great news ? ’ she asked. But he had not, and so it happened that Tom West’s wife was able to tell how another man—the chap by the name of Ned Rivers, a fellow-labourer with her husband—had come forward and made a clean breast, and confessed to the slaughter of the sheep.

“ ‘ ’Twas a plot against my Tom,’ she said. ‘ And the man went down to the prison yesterday at noon and gave hisself up for the crime, because his fearful remorse after his sin had made him want to die. And my Tom will be free come to-morrow week ! And ’twas me as saved his life after all, Hangman Merdle ! ’

“ ‘ And so you did, then,’ admitted the executioner. ‘ And nobody better pleased than me, I’m sure. How’s your babby ? ’

“ ‘ He’s all right. And I’ve been allowed to see my husband, and he’s terrible interested in it all, and will be very proud if you can come and drink a dish of tea along with us and a few neighbours next week.’

“ ‘ Next week ? No,’ answered the other, handling his restored rope. ‘ If what you tell me be true, I’m free to go on to Plymouth by this night’s coach. But when business calls me this way again, I shall be very pleased to have a tell along with you and your chap. Let it be a lesson to us all to trust in God and our wives, ma’am ! ’ ”

WHITE HEATHER

WHITE HEATHER

WE was talking about luck and white heather, and some held for it ; but most of us laughed. Then Rowland, who hadn't told a story for a week, gave us this one. Of course I'd heard it, but 'twas new to all the rest.

" Luck ? " he said. " Not always. I can mind a very startling thing where 'twas something mighty different from luck it brought. And not exactly one of those cases neither where you might have said that 'twas an ill wind blowed nobody any good, and that good luck came in disguise—though two people thought so at the time. No, 'twas clouded fortune every way—the sort of poor speed that runs in families, like red hair. You can't tell why : there ban't no good working reason for it ; yet 'tis there, and will crop out the moment the chance falls.

" But when I say it happened to they Webbers down to Hexworthy, of course you'll understand. 'Twas as if Providence had forgot 'em—to say it in a pious spirit. Naught prospered among 'em from generation to generation, and yet the hardest judge couldn't say it was their own fault exactly ; because 'tis outside nature for a man to choose his own intellects, and the poor toads couldn't no more help being born without brains than you and me could help being born with 'em. They had sensible wives, too, for 'tis often the whim of a clever woman to take a simple man ; but the Webber mould of mind was the easiest to hand down, seemingly, and whether 'twas a man or a

woman wedded from that stock, their childer was almost sure to be terrible light-laden wi' wits.

“Well, prosperity don't home with the fools, and though good as gold, poor Jane and Samson Webber could only just make shift to keep a roof over the heads of themselves and their darter. Alison she was called, and a very pretty woman without a doubt. The soft-eyed, coaxing sort—tall and comely and sweet of voice. She was their only one, and they hoped in their secret hearts that she'd make a match worthy of her, and be in a condition of life presently to keep 'em out of the union workhouse. The trouble was that in their humble way she never seed nobody of any account, and couldn't go where successful men are to be found.

“But, nevertheless, one did find her, and he was Silas Worth, the farmer at Little Sherberton. He'd got up home to fifty, heartwhole; but when his mother died he cast about and bethought him that he must have a partner. A fiddle-faced, clean-living man, with old-fashioned whiskers and weak eyes, and a dab of time's whitewash showing over his ears. No maiden had ever looked at him; and never did he think of them, or hunger for such a ticklish possession, till his parent went, and he began to understand there were such things as cooking and the tending of a house. And first, no doubt, he was merely interested in Alison, as he might have been in a new harrow or seed-drill; but after a bit his banked-up fires blazed out, as they will sometimes in one of they cold, virgin men if he suddenly falls in love. He courted like a good 'un, and chucked a pound or two of his money about by all accounts.

“He was very well-to-do for them parts, by reason of his sheep. Old Dartmoors crossed with Devon Long Wools they was, and their coats were a marvel—fifteen to twenty pounds they carried as often as not. Splendid wool,

I can assure 'e ; but the art lies in the breeding, for the temptation be to go for the wool alone ; whereas the first point you've got to mind is that you don't breed out the Dartmoor constitution. And Silas Worth understood these things ; and many—for envy, I dare say—sneered at the man, and said wi' his long jaws and mournful brown eyes, and rather high-pitched voice, he weren't but little better than a sheep himself.

“ Sheep or no, however, he had a high character for righteous dealing and sober living. And, what was more to the point in the matter of Alison Webber, he had pluck and perseverance, and wouldn't take ' no ' for an answer.

“ The thing didn't run suent by any means, for she'd got no use for the man at the bottom of her heart. In fact, her heart was full to the brim with love for another sort of chap. Just the old story, in fact, and grey-eyed young Alison felt as if Silas might make a pleasant uncle, but couldn't picture him any closer without a shiver and a pang. Her parents, on the contrary, knew 'twas do or die in the matter, and they helped Silas in season and out. As poor as coots, and every chance of being poorer you see, because Jane always tore her washing by some unhappy accident, and so got less and less to do ; while Samson, he was a thatcher, and they shining, everlasting correlgated iron roofs were just beginning to come in at that time, and, of course, they was his doom. So they gived the girl no peace, and Silas, blinded by love's selfishness, couldn't see that he was making her life a cruel burden ; but pressed on with his warm heart and silly voice—though it nearly always talked sense. And, so like as not, it was the flow of solid sense that drowned her spirit ; for a man of fifty must have a large experience and a cunning mind to please and delight a girl of twenty-two. And, of course, Mr. Worth had neither. He was good and sensible, and fairly

choked her. 'Twas like feeding a healthy, hungry creature on naught but milk food.

"And then, of course, there was the right one—right in her eyes, but wrong to her parents. Whatever else Giles Maddock may have been, milk food he was not. 'Twas his father, old Maddock of Postbridge, as they axed when he was dying where he'd like to lie to. 'Will 'e be buried here, in the new cemetery, or be took over to Widecombe, or go up to Princetown?' they said; and he elected for Princetown. 'I've lived to Postbridge for just on eighty year, my dears,' he answered, 'and I'm wishful for a change.' A heathen old man in his opinions, yet I never heard as he did anybody any harm. 'Father don't believe in nothing—gods or devils—do 'e father?' his boy Giles axed him in my hearing, and the old chap answered: 'Ess fay, devils I believe in now. I began to believe in 'em about the time you turned fifteen year old, my son.'

"But at twenty-five Giles Maddock weren't a devil exactly, but a very manly, peppery, hard-riding man, without more wickedness than belongs to his age, and with a handsome red face and a ginger moustache and blue eyes. He liked the girls in general and they liked him; but Alison Webber he loved properly, and there's no doubt but they were tokened in secret. Of course, Giles was nobody—no havage, no money, no nothing but a fine face and figure and a good conceit of himself. He was under water-keeper by Dart, and got fifteen shilling a week, and clamoured for twenty.

"And there soon comed a climax to the affair because, naturally at his age, Worth didn't want to waste a longful time wooing, and felt terrible anxious to have the matter settled and the day fixed. He knew a bit about Giles Maddock, but not all. 'Twas no wonder to him that another was after Alison; indeed, seeing the state of his feelings,

he wouldn't have wondered if twenty had been after her ; but as to Giles Maddock, from his high and safe position as a man of money and position, Worth couldn't take him serious at all.

“ Then it came to a question whether the girl hadn't better flout her parents and tell Silas plump out that she loved another man. She reckoned that would be the proper thing ; but Maddock, he judged it might be wiser to wait a little bit till he got his pound a week. He was a hopeful man, you see, as them with a large conceit of themselves most generally are.

“ The lovers met one evening where Swincombe River runs to Dart, and Giles was a bit excited, because the night afore he'd catched Ted Willes poaching and got him took up for it ; but Alison weren't interested in that. She was properly down on her luck, in fact, and not the beautiful river, nor the reds of evening shining on the trees, nor the cheerful talk of the water-keeper could hearten her.

“ You mightn't know Swincombe Firs ; but, if not, you'll do well to seek the place of a summer evening when the sun's westering. Dart comes looping from east to south betwixt banks all covered wi' granite rocks and brake fern and furzes ; and afore the stream reaches Swincombe Firs, great moss-clad boulders stop the way and fret her into singing. And as for the firs themselves, they lift in a clump wi' long reaches of deep grass beneath 'em. Flowers shine out there, and by day they devil's darning-needles ¹ dance over the water and hawk and rustle in the air ; and by night the glow-worms twinkle.

“ And here 'twas that Alison told her Giles in a word that she could suffer no more.

“ 'Twas her parents that made the trouble, and she was very fond of 'em, and very wishful to see them better off.

¹ Dragon-flies.

But, though she'd told 'em about Giles and made a glowing picture of him and his prospects and great hopes and high desert, 'twas all in vain. She was wearing out and weakening. She made the man see very clearly that things were running crooked, and that if he didn't strike soon, and strike hard, he was like to lose her.

"But what could he do? You may have the heart of a lion, but if you haven't got money, you'll be hungry, unless you steal. The times have changed, you see, and though the battle be to the strong still, 'tis the strength have shifted. Cash is the mighty thing now, and the world lays itself out to protect and support cash. 'Tis the only god left on earth at all—leastways, the only god left that will help you at a pinch.

"Well, there it stood between Alison and Giles, and she, as had lived in poverty all her life and knew nothing else, would have took him and his fifteen shilling a week with joy and gladness; but if she did, 'twas the last hope of her parents gone; and she was a good daughter, and they knew it, and took care to grind into her a daughter's duty.

"She laid it afore Giles that evening, and he didn't take too kindly to it. In fact, he lost his temper above a bit.

"'God's truth!' he said. 'Be you to ruin the whole of your life for them two old people? 'Tis for parents to look after their children, if you ax me, not for children to sacrifice all for parents. You don't suppose my good parts won't be found out afore I'm much older? You don't think a man like me be going to rest content with fitten shilling for evermore? I'll give you my word that I'll be a good useful son to your father and mother when the time comes.'

"'I know it well,' said Alison.

"'I wish to God you'd run away with me!' burst out the man.

“ ‘Where to?’ she asked. ‘Besides, if you run away, you’ll lose your fifteen bob a week. ’Tis only the rich can do dashing things like that.’

“ ‘I’ll see Silas Worth, then,’ said the under water-keeper. ‘I can speak straighter to him than what you can; and if he pesters you any more after he’s heard me, then he’s no man.’

“ But, of course, it was just because Silas was a man that it made no difference. He’d got the power, and to a chap of his standing and age, young Giles Maddock seemed as naught. Instead of throwing over Alison himself, Mr. Worth was angered that such a one as Giles had showed enough cheek to look at her. In fact, he surprised himself by the high-minded view he took of the situation. And he wouldn’t hear Alison on it neither. He astonished her not a little, and told her that, with her great gifts of body and soul, she must look far higher than such as Maddock for a husband. Silas kept at her very dogged indeed, and so did her parents. They relaxed no effort from morn till night; and to show how little Worth thought of the claims of the rival man, he actually advanced Giles, put his case favourably at headquarters, and, by his own act, got Maddock’s money raised to a pound a week. He mentioned it to Alison on the fatal day, and she thanked him for it, and said she never doubted but he was a kindly and large-hearted creature. But, if the deed hadn’t been done already, she might have fired off a word or two for Giles at that moment, and chid Silas Worth, because, when Silas said what he’d done, he spoke of helping t’other man as God A’mighty might speak of helping a dung-beetle. Scorn’s no salt for a kind gift, anyway; but’ twas plain the farmer held Giles of no account at all. And when, later on, he left Alison’s home and rode off very gay and gallant over the Moor to his farm at Little Sherberton,

there was only one thought in his head and one hugeous joy in his heart, and no room in either of 'em for anything else.

“ For she'd took him.

“ ‘ Good-night, my sweeting ! ’ he cries out, and gallops off on his black hoss, feeling like a boy, and looking ten years younger than usual. All rose-coloured the world to him, no doubt, and if there was a tear-stain or two on the fairness of it, and if his conscience pricked him here and there, he made light of them things, as a love-mad man naturally would do in such a case, because he knew himself and he knew his vartues, and, without self-praise, could honestly feel he had the gifts proper to a pattern husband.

“ He rode off then and left her drowning in tears, and her old people humming about her like a brace of bees round a bit of clover. They told her what a brave, good girl she was, and how the Lord would richly reward her both in this world and the next. And Samson, who never lost an excuse for a nip between meals, had out his gin bottle to drink luck ; and Jane, she pawed and prayed over her daughter, and said that Alison was the light of their forlorn lives, and would keep their grey hairs out of the house, and give 'em brave grand-childer to guide their footsteps when they grew weak and tootlish.

“ But the poor girl escaped after a bit, and she was up over, kneeling by her little chicket-window, crying still, and looking with drowned eyes the way that Silas Worth had ridden, when up come Giles Maddock. He was as gay for once as she was glum. He'd fetched along a brave rabbit for Mrs. Webber and a brave bit of news for his sweetheart. In fact, he was bursting with joy and pride, you might say ; but neither lasted long, for the truth pricked him, like a pin pricks a bladder, and let the joy and pride out cruel quick.

“ He was full of his own news, of course, and long before he reached the cot he bawled out that the Fishing Board had lifted up his money to a pound. But then out hopped father Webber, to explain that none less than Mr. Worth had done this good deed for him ; and out hopped mother Webber, to tell him that the matter of Alison was at an end for him, and that her girl was tokened to Farmer Worth and to be wedded so quick as possible within the limits of law and religion. But Alison young Giles did not see just then, because she drew in her head when she marked him coming.

“ Upon this masterpiece of news the under water-keeper dropped his rabbit, cussed they old folk with all the power of passion, and refused to believe one word of what he had heard. He trapsed off, shaking with rage, and forgot the rabbit in his wrath ; but Jane Webber, she fell upon it and took it indoors.

“ ’Twasn’t much more than an hour later that the disappointed man hastened back again. Candle-teening time had fallen when he returned, and the smell of a cooking rabbit filled the house place.

“ ‘ Here’s a terrible come-along-of-it ! ’ cried Giles. ‘ I was going down over in the dimpsy light and what should I see but a hoss on three legs by that there stickle place above the river ! And, close by, if I didn’t find a man sprawled out in the way ! And fust I thought he was asleep, but very soon I feared by the queer way he was lying and the form of him that he must be awful sick at the least. ’Tis all very sad, I’m sure, but thank God there’s none depending on him. And when I think how joyful he was when last I seed him, it do almost make a man fear to be alive.’

“ ‘ Poor soul, who be it then ? ’ asked Jane Webber, turning from the fire. ‘ Was it drink, do ’e reckon ? ’

“ ‘ His neck bone’s broke,’ answered Maddock ; ‘ cracked through like a carrot. No doubt he was full of his luck, and thinking of the future, and trusting to the hoss—a hoss he never axed to carry beer for sartain. And the steepness would have been naught, but no doubt he put his foot in a rabbit-hole—the hoss I mean—and his poor off foreleg be hanging from under the knee by a thread, and he’ll have to be shot so quick as they can fetch a gun. And to my knowledge he was worth forty pound. There stood the poor brute beside his master, wondering what fearful thing had suddenly come over the face of the world ; and I just made haste back with the news ; and now I must run down to Hexworthy, so fast as ever I can, and get some men and a cart to fetch in the corpse. Little he thought when——’

“ ‘ Who is it ? Who is it ? ’ cried Samson. ‘ What a chap you are to keep on so, and never so much as tell us the poor fellow’s name ! ’

“ ‘ Well known in these parts, and well thought upon, and none owes him more thanks than me, I’m sure, for ’twas him put up my money, and then died in the nick of time. ’Tis poor Mr. Worth, in a word. He must have pitched on his head, and white as a dog’s tooth he lies, with his face looking over his back.’

“ The old people yowled—out of sorrow for themselves—and Jane got one of her shaking agues there and then, and dropped on the hearthstone.

“ ‘ And if the poor unfortunate chap hadn’t found white heath,’ runs on young Giles. ‘ Yes, he had, and he’d lighted off the hoss and picked it, and mounted again, no doubt ; and there ’twas in his button-hole under his twisted head ; and somehow ’twas the saddest sight of all, and fairly curdled my innards to see it there, though I couldn’t tell you for why.’

“ He went to the stairs what led to the upper chambers and yelled out to Alison Webber that Silas was gone home by a short cut. Then he set off to blaze the thing abroad ; and 'tis no good pretending the man was mournful or chap-fallen, because he was not ; and for that matter he did not pretend it himself. Alison comed down from her bedroom then, and it took all her time to console and comfort them crushed and shattered old people. For from that moment 'twas said they had a clear fore-knowledge they'd end their days in the workhouse. And they was perfectly right : they did do so.

“ And with time their daughter took Giles Maddock. They didn't marry in haste exactly, for though quickly tokened afore the nation, 'twasn't till he rose to be head water-keeper with a cottage and thirty shilling a week that they wedded. And she brought him five, and felt the weight of his hand sometimes, though only now and then of a Saturday night, I believe. He turned out middling, like most of us, and Alison allowed in after life that, though he might have been a deal better, he might also have been a deal worse. But there—marriage is a lottery, according to the old saw ; and though the men say it oftenest, 'tis the women that know it best.”

THE RUGGLESTONE

THE RUGGLESTONE

A FEW of us was in 'The Plume of Feathers' having a tell about things in general, when the talk drifted to the Rugglestone—a great mass of granite weighing a hundred tons and more—one of the most famous sights in Widecombe village without a doubt. It lies a quarter of a mile up the hill from the Inn—at the corner of one of Johnny Rowland's fields—and the amazing thing about it is that once on a time it was a logan rock ; by which I mean the mass hung on another monster boulder, so clever as a door on a hinge, and it used to need but certain pressure to set it rocking. But that was in the old time before us, and none could move the logan now.

From the midst of the Rugglestone there lifted up a little rowan tree, which be there to this day, and it was one of the wonders of the stone how it could nourish a sapling five foot high and help it to grow and bear fruit in the proper season of the year. And the great stone itself was all covered over with moss and fungus—green and grey and black—a very remarkable freak of nature without a doubt—and thinking men often puzzled above a bit to know how the monster got there, and how it come to be set so careful on top of t'other.

Then Johnny, from behind the bar, told us about the stone and a very strange tale what belonged to it.

"It fell out in my grandfather's time," he said, "when things was different from what they are now and this house

was newly built, because the place cried out for another inn for the labouring men from the farms this side the Vale.

“Folk took very kindly to the ‘Plume’ from the first, and the men from Blackslade and Tunhill and Chittleford and Venton and other outlying farms soon established a nice bit of custom. And not least among the regulars was a very quiet and kind-hearted man by the name of Christian Smerdon. He farmed Venton in those days—for ’twas long afore the Cobleighs went there—and he lived a widower without any family. You might have thought that to such a genial and child-loving soul, Providence would have sent a quiverful; but these things don’t happen according to human ideas of what be vitty, and Christian had neither chick nor child. In fact he was a very lonely man and so a lot of his warmth of heart ran to waste according. A nervous and timorous spirit, though he was known to show good pluck with a drop of liquor in him, as you shall find.

“Well, he was here one night, and Jack Mogridge was here, and James Dunnybrig and his son, Valiant Dunnybrig, from Chittleford. No doubt a good few more had dropped in, for ’twas a Saturday, and thirsty weather just afore the harvest. And one other man must be mentioned also—him being a foreigner, by name of Lucky Knowles. At least, that was what he called himself; but I doubt not he had a dozen names and found it convenient to ring the changes upon ’em. A beetle-browed, night-hawk of a man—a gipsy to be plain; and him and his wife and two children lived in a caravan and went their rounds—now here, now there—selling wicker-work and spar-gads for thatching, and clothes-pegs and the like.

“A clever man with his hands and head both, and he might have stood higher in the world but for his disposition, which was rash and reckless. He didn’t neighbour kindly

with house-dwellers, but liked to be free to roam ; and he'd go and come as it pleased him. But he was pretty often in Widecombe ; because our withy-beds tempted him a lot and he paid ready money for the withies and said that they were the best in the country.

" It all fell out most curiously I'm sure ; and it showed two facts to the slowest mind ; and one was that Christian Smerdon had a twist in him none among his generation ever guessed ; and the other was that a gipsy can never be reckoned with. For a leopard sooner changes his spots than they Egyptians can alter their treacherous natures. 'Twas quite outside anything you might have expected to think that Knowles and Smerdon should have clashed ; but clash they did and between 'em they made the story of the Rugglestone. Leastways the only story as I ever heard tell about it ; but since it have doubtless laid there from the beginning of the world, no doubt many other strange things fell out before there was any clever people about to mark 'em or tell 'em again.

" The company was talking about the Rugglestone, just as we were to-night, and young Dunnybrig, he says to my grandfather : ' What be this tale about the Rugglestone, master ? ' And grandfather answers : ' Just this, Valiant Dunnybrig. The great rock can still be shook in one way and only one. No power of man will move it more ; but the truth holds good, I doubt not, though none put it into practice no more.' ' And what be that ? ' asked young Valiant. ' Why,' said my grandfather, ' you take the key of the church and go to Rugglestone at midnight and put the key under un as the church clock strikes, and then the stone will rock like a cradle ! For all his hundred tons he'll move as easy as a feather. A dozen hosses and a hundred men couldn't make him do it,' says my

grandfather ; ' but the church key can. And that I steadfastly believe.'

" They laughed at him—most of 'em—and Lucky Knowles loudest of all ; but Christian Smerdon, he didn't laugh, being a very serious-minded man with a great power of belief in signs and wonders.

" They argued about it and grandfather held to his tale most resolute, for he wasn't a man to be shook by education ; but only a few took his side. Then Smerdon spoke.

" "'Tis a pity that us of this generation don't put it to the test,' he said. ' After all, it ban't beyond the power of thought for one of you chaps to go up over alone with the church key some night and see if the charm still holds good or be grown weak.'

" Gipsy Knowles laughed at that.

" ' Easy to talk ! ' he answered, ' but why for should you ask these clever men to do such a silly deed ? Because you haven't got the pluck to do it yourself, Christian Smerdon.'

" At this attack, Christian fired up, as well he might. T'others laughed because he got hot, and that made Smerdon the more vexed. He'd had his two pints by then and was pot-valiant, or else perhaps he might have thought twice afore he spoke.

" ' Like your impidence ! ' he said to Lucky. ' But I'd no more fear to visit the stone at midnight, than I'd fear to go there at noon. I'd snap my fingers at it ! '

" Lucky Knowles took him up quick at that.

" ' You think so,' he answered ; ' but you be out of reckoning there, for you haven't got the courage to do it.'

" The crafty wretch wanted for Smerdon to fall in his trap, and fall he did. 'Twas a mystery to the men looking

on, and not till three days later did the truth come out. Then they all gasped to see the gipsy's cunning.

“ ‘ You say that I won't take church key to the Rugglestone at midnight ? ’ asks Smerdon.

“ ‘ I do,’ answers Lucky. ‘ 'Tis your nature to be a coward. You can't help it and 'tis no disgrace to you. But I declare that you wouldn't go single-handed to the Rugglestone at dead of night ; and I'll go further and bet you a golden sovereign you won't.’

“ ‘ Done ! ’ cries Smerdon, very excited ; ‘ Rowland can hold the stakes, and here's my sovereign, and where's yours ? ’

“ But Lucky was good for the money. He brought out twenty shilling and my grandfather counted it and put it in the till. A few friends of Smerdon, knowing his poor pluck, whispered to him to withdraw while there was yet time ; but he'd got screwed up to such a fighting pitch by now that he vowed he'd see it through.

“ ‘ 'Tis beer be making you so brave,’ sneered Lucky Knowles, and Christian answered him :

“ ‘ What then ? If beer be making me brave now, no doubt 'twill make me brave again at the appointed time, so you'll lose your sovereign and look a precious fool for your pains—beer or no beer ! ’ he says.

“ Which was one for Christian without a doubt.

“ Two days later they fixed the night for the trial and then old Dunnybrig, as didn't trust the gipsy a yard, asked him where he was going to be on that evening.

“ ‘ You needn't fear me,’ answers Knowles. ‘ I'm off to-morrow at sun-up and shall be twenty mile away when Smerdon here goes to the Rugglestone. I'll drop in for my money a fortnight hence. And I expect the man to be fair and straight with me and confess in due time that he couldn't do it. And I trust that none will help him or play me crooked behind my back ! ’

“With that the gipsy took a great tea-kettle of broth, as he'd bought from my grandfather for his missis, who was a bit ailing, and away he went to his caravan, in the corner of a water-meadow, under Venton nigh the withy-beds.

“And he was as good as his word, for with morning he was gone and nought left to mark the place but chips of wood and bark of withy-bands, where he'd been at his basket work, and charred stones and a black patch on the earth, where he'd had his fire, and a litter of old boots, as he always seemed to leave behind him.

“So there it stood and the eventful night come round and Christian borrowed the key of the church from old Mother Arnell, whose business it was to keep it for visitors. He drank till closing time and went home to Venton more than market merry. Indeed all his friends were a lot put about for him, because they thought he'd be very likely to break his neck getting up over the rough ground to Rugglestone in the dark—even if the beer held to him till midnight and lent him the needful courage for the task.

“My grandfather thought as highly of Christian Smerdon as any man, and so he lay awake that night anxious like, listening for twelve o'clock to strike and hoping that all was as it should be.

“Then, five or ten minutes after the bell had beat from the church tower and grandfather was dropping off, what should he hear but feet running fast! A minute later somebody come to the door and Mr. Smerdon's thin voice was lifted up in the darkness.

“‘Gaffer Rowland!’ he shouted, ‘for the Lord's sake come down house and let me in! Here's a most amazing miracle have happened and surely to God no such thing ever fell out before!’

“Grandfather was up like a cricket. At first he thought as Christian had met with foul play and Lucky Knowles

had hid for him and took the key and made off to church with it to steal the almsbox or some such devilish deed ; but nothing like that had fallen out. And when grandfather went down and teened a candle and oped the door, there was two voices, if you please ; for Christian was talking and a babby was screaming !

“ Smerdon had a bundle in his arms and out of it was coming a little pipe, shrill as a bird.

“ ‘ Guy Fawkes and holy angels ! ’ cries out my grandfather. ‘ Whatever have ’e got there ? ’

“ ‘ A human babby ! ’ answers back Christian. ‘ To the stone I went, brave as a regiment of soldiers, but scarce was I beside it when I heard a child hollering and shrieking like a sucking pig being killed. And my knees smote and my hair rose and my sweat poured, for I thought for sure ’twas a wishtness or some other kind of ghost. But then, waving my lantern afore I turned to fly, I seed a bundle right under my nose, and the homely look of it braced me up and calmed my terror. No doubt the Lord made me brave for His own good reasons. ’Twas just this blanket laid on a bit of dry fern under the rock I found. And I saw that ’twas a child, and went to un and picked up the little creature and saved his life.’

“ Meantime grandfather had opened the parcel and took a look.

“ ‘ ’Tis the tiniest babby ever I seed,’ he declared. ‘ A man-child and not much bigger than a Skye terrier. A fairy changeling so like as not ; but his lungs be all right for certain. He ain’t been born a fortnight from the look of un and ’tis very clear he’s cruel hungry.’

“ Christian Smerdon was as much excited as if he’d found a gold mine.

“ ‘ Finding’s keeping in a case of this sort,’ he said. You bear me witness, Rowland, that I come upon the

child quite friendless out in the open world, all alone under the Rugglestone at dead of night ; and I defy and deny any mortal creature to take un away from me ! ’

“ ‘ The Lord will take un away from you if you don’t bustle round and find somebody as understand babby’s food,’ said my grandfather. ‘ A tender bud like this can’t go very long without attention, so you’d better go off and wake up some woman so soon as you can. He ban’t at all in our line and there’s no females here of a night since my darter married.’

“ By good chance Christian had a great friend whose wife was a nursing mother at the time. She didn’t live above three mile off, and my grandfather fetched out his pony, and in ten minutes Smerdon was away galloping to Ponsworthy to wake up the people and get his new-found treasure a drink. No more afraid of the dark than you or me, I do assure ’e !

“ And the upshot was that he stuck to the child and adopted it and flouted all the rumours and warnings against such a dangerous step. For of course ’twas clear as light that Lucky Knowles, knowing how fond Christian was of childer, had fixed upon him as a father for his third. Like the cuckoo he was, and worked it very cunning so as his child should drop into Smerdon’s nest at Venton. And so it fell out, and no doubt the gipsy and his wife also were hid not twenty yard from the Rugglestone that night to see that all went well.

“ The police was for hunting down Lucky and Mrs. Lucky so as their crime might be brought home ; but Christian assured ’em their trouble could be spared.

“ ‘ I don’t know and I don’t care where the child came from,’ he declared, ‘ but Providence have chose to send it to me, and ’tis a thing that I’d rather have than be lord of the manor ; so I be going to cleave to un ; and for that

matter the toad knows me already and wild hosses couldn't drag him away from me.'

"The babby was named Christian Pancras Smerdon, after his foster parent and the church saint to Widecombe. And most people thought the saint ought to have come first. A very good, clever chap; and carried on the name in his turn, though the proper Smerdons of Bone Hill and Southways never would own him. He married a Coaker and prospered, but they be all gone, of course, years and years ago. The Smerdons was a great race and lie thick as grass in the churchyard to this day.

"As for Lucky Knowles, such was the cool cheek of the man, that six months after Christian found the babby, his caravan turned up again by the withy-bed, as if nought had happened, and of course he dropped in to the 'Plume' to know if he'd won his bet. And when they told him about the child, and axed if he could throw any light upon such an adventure, he appeared to be very much astonished and declared, so solemn as need be, that 'twas all news to him. He was a lot more troubled at losing his bet.

"All the same they did say that Lucky's wife went over to Venton one day, when Mr. Smerdon was to market, and waylaid the nursery maiden in Webburn Lane and had a good look at the child and told the girl that he was shaping for a very fine boy, and axed half a hundred questions, and gave a lot of advice about young Christian Pancras, as didn't ought to have been any business of hers."

THE MYSTERY OF THE SAILOR-MEN

THE MYSTERY OF THE SAILOR-MEN

A TRAMP had come and gone, and Gregory Snow, who was always soft with 'out o' works,' had given the man a drink. After which we fell to talking of the ways of the lazy rascals, and I was all against 'em, because what I say is, if a man don't work he didn't ought to eat; and Moses Butt nodded his head, as much as to agree with me, and Bonus—a proper towser for work always—he said so too. But, much to my surprise, some of us found ourselves in another opinion and Uncle Tom Cobleigh declared, for his part, that work be a gift and some men have it and some have it not.

“ I knowed a very nice, poaching old man back-along,” he said; “ and he made it his boast that he'd never done a stroke of honest work in his life. And yet a cleverer and a more kind-hearted chap I never neighboured with. I was always sorry when they took him off to the lock-up, for one thing and another, and always delighted to welcome him back again. Clever wasn't the word for him—a proper rogue! He'd work harder to escape work than anybody ever I heard tell upon; and his shifts to raise the wind would have made even the widow and the fatherless die o' laughing.”

Then we got talking about tramps and loafers in general and their tricks and dodges and signals and hookem-snivey ways; and the subject led to Johnny calling home a very

fine tale about a chap called Martin Rowe, as had a public-house to Princetown many years earlier in the century, and a farmer called Mary Tuckett—a single woman and daughter of an old sea-farer, who turned to the land when he left the ocean.

“He was Captain Tuckett of the Mercantile marine, and when he died everybody thought that his daughter would give up Dunnabridge Farm and go away from Dartmoor; but she didn’t,” began Johnny Rowland. “No; he took to farming when he left the sea, though ’twas only just a pastime with him and he didn’t make much money, if any at all, at Dunnabridge. But he liked the Moor and always said that, after the rolling sea, ’twas the best place he knowed; and so he came there and spent a bit of his savings and enjoyed his fag end of life. A widower he was with but one child, and when he died, two year short of eighty, Mary Tuckett might have been hovering a year or two over fifty perhaps, though she didn’t look that by five or six year at the least.

“And Rowe was in the early sixties himself—a widower and a sailor also. He’d sailed as mate along with Miss Mary’s father and had known her ever since she was a young and comely girl; and when his missis died and the days of mourning were passed, he began to hanker after his old skipper’s daughter; and he was hankering yet, though he’d been a widow man fifteen year at the time of this queer tale.

“You see he dwelt up to Princetown village and kept a small house of refreshment there; and as Miss Tuckett’s farm weren’t above five mile off, ’twas a very common thing for him to drive over and offer himself in marriage from time to time as the fancy took him. It had got to be a sort of holiday amusement for both of them, you might say; and though she always refused him, there weren’t

no sting to it and he went on trying and feeling that when the right moment came and he caught her just in the proper mood, her 'no' would change to 'yes.'

"She was a clever farmer and took to it, and she'd got a Dartmoor woman, named Alice Mumford, for her right hand at Dunnabridge; and what them two females didn't know about Dartmoor farming weren't worth knowing. The hinds went in terrible fear of Alice, and no man nearer than Plymouth was ever known to over-reach her. Spinsters both, but very different, because Miss Tuckett, while firm, was kind and full of the milk of human nature, but Alice Mumford—it is enough to say that her grandfather was hanged for sheep-stealing and her father died just in time to escape the heavy hand of the law. She was a hard case and Martin Rowe never liked and never trusted her neither.

"There comed a day—just after Easter 'twas—when the man left his little licensed house to his potman and drove over to have a bit of fun with Mary Tuckett. And she had news for him and he felt more pleased than not to know that Alice Mumford was going to leave Dunnabridge. So far as love-making went it spoilt the day, no doubt, because Mary found herself far too excited to talk or think about anything else but t'other woman. In fact she took it a good bit to heart and dressed down her old friend pretty sharp. In a word Alice was striking for more wages, and as she'd had 'em raised twice in eighteen months a'ready, her missis began to fear you can pay too dear for anything, and told her she mustn't be so grasping. With that t'other used coarse language and said she was the backbone of Dunnabridge, and assured Miss Tuckett that she'd have the brokers in before a twelve-month was passed if she got rid of her. But Martin Rowe's Mary, so to call her, had plenty of pluck and she hit out from

the shoulder—with her tongue, I mean—and in a word, Alice Mumford had given notice and was going that day month.

“And go she did; but she didn’t go far. There was an empty cottage to Brownberry—a homestead not above half a mile from Dunnabridge, and there went Alice Mumford and lived on her savings, which was accounted pretty heavy; and she lost no opportunity to say untrue and unkind things of her old mistress.

“Her cot stood by the highroad over the Moor, while Dunnabridge hung back a lot and rose up over Dart, where the river runs in a great loop of water full of rocks with furze brakes on the banks. The old farm had been pulled down afore the Tucketts went there and a stout modern house had taken its place; but the fields were the same as ever; and the tar-pitched barn, with the granite steps still stood there; and the spinneys up over, on the hill top above, were a pretty sure draw for a fox most hunting days. Dunnabridge used to be all mud and slush and chickens and pigs and ducks in wet weather; and there was an old stone over the water trough, by an aged white-thorn, that haven’t been moved for centuries. And you might generally see a tortoise-shell cat with a broken paw lopping about in the yard, or coming down the wooden ladder from the loft. It couldn’t have been the same cat, for Rowe had knowed the place twenty year by the time of this tale; but he assured me that a lame cat have always been part of the furniture of the farm, and a bob-tailed, black and grey sheep-dog also.

“When next he called on Mary the mystery of the sailor-men was in full swing and, as an old sailor-man himself, it interested him amazing. He noticed a change in her to begin with, and was a good deal surprised to find her a thought snappy, which was curious, for a milder tempered woman by nature never drew breath.

“ Holne Revel ’twas, and Rowe had stopped to Dunna-bridge on his way back, to pick a bit of supper with Mary and give her the news. They talked on general subjects, and then she said :

“ ‘ My stars ! I never knowed you so dull, Martin ! ’

“ ’Twas a hint, and no mistake, for along with the revel, and Farmer Redland falling down in a fit by the steam-roundabout, and one thing and another, Rowe had quite forgot the matter as always passed between him and Mary when they met after a few months’ absence.

“ ‘ Well you may say it,’ he replied to her. ‘ You might a’most think I was market merry to have forgot ! ’

“ ‘ I wish you was,’ she answered. ‘ I’d sooner have you like that than like this. Here be I—a lonely, forgotten woman that none ever calls upon, except tramps begging for a meal, and you—as haven’t seen me since Noah’s flood, I should think—can’t tell nothing livelier than news of a man I don’t know falling down in a fit ! ’

“ ‘ I’m badly to blame,’ he confessed. ‘ Never was such a know-nought great zany as me.’

“ With that he plunged into the usual thing and offered his heart and hand, and told her that he was steadfast as the northern star and true as the needle to the pole, and all the rest of it.

“ ‘ Now Alice Mumford be gone,’ he said, ‘ your state is most forlorn and I wish to God you’d change it. Here be I living a lonely life up the hill, and you living a lonely life down the hill, and why to goodness you can’t see the foolishness——’

“ She got a lot happier when he struck into the familiar subject and let him take her hand as usual. She put her fine face to his, and blinked her beautiful pale brown eyes ; and somehow he felt as she was in a more yielding frame of mind than ever he’d known her to be since her father died.

'Twas the influence of Alice Mumford gone, no doubt, for that whey-faced and cross-eyed creature was always a ferocious man-hater—owing to the fact that the male sex had no use for her from her youth up. She said that 'twas along of her grandfather being hanged t'other side of the Moor; but 'twasn't at all; because no fair-minded man would let a little thing like that stand between himself and a nice woman if he loved her. But Alice was that curst and vinegary and evil-minded that no man ever had offered for her; and now the time was past and she hated 'em all.

“ Her being once away from Dunnabridge, however, a change had clearly come over Mary Tuckett, and man though Martin Rowe was, the unexpected softness of her took him a bit by surprise; because, you see, he'd never counted upon it, and 'twas like a bolt from the blue to find after all this time that she wanted for him to kiss her—a thing he'd offered to do for fifteen year and been refused. In fact a man ban't screwed up to a feat like that in a minute, and he lost his self-control and held off. He saw in a twinkle the case was altered and that he had but to go in and win; and very well pleased and mighty proud he was, no doubt; but the climax of the love affair had come too sudden and startling. He wanted to think over it all. He'd got into a sort of habit of paying court and expecting 'no' for an answer; and to find Mary suddenly altering the run of the game rather flabbergasted him. In plain English he wasn't sorry when, at the critical moment, there came a loud knock at the door.

“ There was none to home but her, for her men and maid were to the revel, so she had to rise up and go; and while she was away Rowe steadied himself and resolved that he wouldn't return to the subject of marriage no more for that day, but come to it—with all the solemn pomp such a thing demanded—somewhere about next Michaelmas,

if not later. There was a powerful lot to think of, and since they had been fiddling and philandering for fifteen year, he felt there couldn't be no crying need to rush it now at a woman's whim.

"She came back crusty as an ill-cooked loaf.

"'Another of them sailor-men,' she said. 'A plague on 'em! They tell each other, I believe, and not a day goes now but one, and sometimes two, ban't here. And half of 'em be rogues and not sailors at all, I'll warrant.'

"You see, when her father was dying, he ordered Mary never to turn away an old sailor, and she never did. But now she told Martin how more and more came, and as by her father's command every such creature was to have sixpence and a full meal, the thing had got far beyond a joke.

"'They was a nuisance from the first, and I thought myself ill-used,' said Mary Tuckett to Martin as she cut the beggar a lump of bread and cheese and poured him a mug of cider; 'but it's got worse by leaps and bounds of late. Half-a-crown the men had out of me last week, and this is the second have called since Thursday last.'

"'All turnpike sailors, I'll wager,' he answered her. 'You can bring him in here and I'll sit behind this screen and mark him while he eats. You ask him about the sea, and I shall very soon know by his remarks if he can tell a marling-spike from a reefing-block.'

"She obeyed; and Rowe hid and listened to a cockney tramp, who may or may not have seen the mud barges in a canal, but had certainly never met with anything nobler afloat. He guzzled and tiddled, however, and took his tanner, and the watcher seed the back of him as he went off. He was clad in sailor's clothes, and that was all could be said for the man.

“When he was gone Mary cast about how she could manage to escape from her promise to her dead father.

“‘My heart sinks when I see the wretches coming down the yard,’ she said. ‘Some be old and some be young; some be ginger and some grey; some go lame and some lack an arm or a hand; but they’re all dressed in that horrid blue with them dirty trousers tight to the knee and loose below; and they’ve all got the same tale about a ship at Plymouth—except the maimed ones. They mostly say they be owed money by the State and have to go to the Docks to get it. Rogues! I itch to set the dog on ’em; but I suppose father would turn in his grave if I did.’

“But Rowe smelt a fraud from the first and by good chance on that very day, while yet ’twas broad light, that happened to make his doubt a certainty.

“Not an hour after the cockney was gone, another sailor-man turned up; and Martin, who hadn’t yet gone, did as before, and told Mercy to fetch the man in the kitchen and let him feed, while he listened unseen. Of course he was no more a sailor than my pot-boy, and when she asked him about the perils of the deep, he told Martin’s nautical ear in half a minute that he was only a wolf in sheep’s clothing and knew nought of the seaman’s life. That didn’t astonish Rowe; but what did was the squint he got of the rascal’s back view as he went off. Then he stared indeed, till his eyes very near bulged out of his head.

“Mercy thought him mad, for, forgetting his hat and everything, he followed the sham sailor and loped along behind a stone wall and kept him in sight, himself unseen.

“The tramp marched down the road on very good terms with himself, and his pursuer saw him as far as Alice Mumford’s cottage in the high road. But there he stopped

and went in. With that Rowe crept nearer, till he was right abreast of the house ; and he squatted under the wall, like a hare in her form, and bided his time.

“ In ten minutes a man come out of the cottage, but he didn't come alone. Another man followed him ; and the first man was the first sailor as had called at Dunnabridge, and the second man was the second sailor as had done so. They had doffed their sailor's togs and they walked off in very good humour clad like a pair of scarecrows, after the manner of their sort as a rule.

“ ‘ We'll call again some fine day, ma'am,' they said to Alice Mumford, who stood at the door to see 'em go ; but she didn't answer, because she was counting pennies as one of the rogues had given her before they set out.

“ Of course Martin Rowe seed the whole wicked trick at a glance ; but he was too clever to pounce on the woman at that time. Instead he trotted back to Mary Tuckett and made a bit of mystery about it and puzzled her not a little. 'Twas his wish, you see, to distract her mind from the subject of matrimony, and he didn't stop very long then, but got on his horse and galloped away pretty soon.

“ ‘ Fret no more about anything,' he told her when she came to see him off in the dimpsy light. ‘ 'Twas rare good fortune as brought me to you to-day, my dear ; because the luck be double-barrelled by the look of it ; and I've heard what will be a great source of joy to me, when I've had time to think it over ; and I've found out what will be a great relief to you presently. But I must go cautious in both matters and not do nothing rash or reckless. Only this I'll promise you : I've found out where your sailor-men come from, and you shan't much longer be troubled with them.'

“ She looked at him dangerously and come close and put up her hand to his as he climbed on the saddle.

“ ‘ There’s one sailor-man as would never be no trouble to me,’ she said.

“ ‘ And what might his name be ? ’ asked Martin, feeling pretty safe perched up on his hoss well out of her reach.

“ ‘ Martin Rowe’s the man’s name,’ she answered, and her eyes in the light of the evening very near brought him off his hoss again. But he felt in justice to himself, as well as the excited woman, that he must let a few days pass.

“ ‘ Have no fear for Martin Rowe,’ he told her, guarded like ; and then trotted away with plenty to think upon.

“ But, after all, he let another man get the credit for his cleverness, and before a week was past he went over to Mr. Byles, at the police-station, and told him of the great mystery.

“ ‘ ‘Tis like this here, Constable Byles,’ he said to the man. ‘ Miss Tuckett dismissed that woman, Alice Mumford, from her service a while back, and Alice, who have got bad blood in her veins without a doubt, swore to be revenged upon her for so doing. And she have been revenged, for since she went there have come a proper plague of sailor-men to Dunnabridge, and owing to her promise to her dead father, Mary Tuckett have had to suffer ‘em. And, when I was there last, one came and I watched him, hidden behind an old leather screen that Miss Tuckett have lately bought to keep the wind out of her back hair on winter nights ; and I heard in a jiffey that he was no sailor ; and I also noted that the man had a black patch on his jumper. Away he went and presently up come another scamp—another sailor if you’ll credit it ! Well, I watched him, likewise, and I stared I warn you, for if he hadn’t a black patch on his jumper also ! And now you’d do well to send one of your men to lie behind the hedge there. Then they’ll find out that when a tramp goes by Alice Mumford’s cottage or calls at it, as the case may be, she

has him in her house, and rigs him up in a suit of sailor's clothes, and sends him off to Dunnabridge, where there's a square meal and a certain sixpence awaiting the thief. Then back he goes to her, and, as I saw her counting pennies the time I was on the watch, I make no doubt at all that she be very well paid for her trouble. 'Tis the most barefaced imposition I ever heard tell about on Dartmoor and you'll do well to look in the matter and see it don't happen no more.'

"Byles was a young officer, with his spurs to win, and he fastened to the job like a dog to a bone. In fact he took it on himself, and three days later it happened just as Martin told him it would happen, and he arrested another fellow coming gaily off from Dunnabridge with sixpence in his pocket, a full meal in his belly and a black patch on his jumper.

"So when next Martin appeared in public 'twas to be a witness against Alice Mumford; and the justices gave her six weeks hard for what she'd done; and she swore something sinful in open court and promised to make it hot both for Rowe and Mary Tuckett when she comed out of klink again.

"But she never had the chance to do them no more wickedness, for a lot may happen in six weeks, and before the end of that time, when Alice was let loose on a trusting world once more, Rowe had taken Mary's lead and finished their affair out o' hand.

"He thought it through, you see, and his common-sense comed to his rescue, and he said to himself, 'Martin, my son, you've been at this here woman to take you for fifteen year, and now, because she's at last ready and willing to do so, you grow faint about it, and find yourself in two minds. 'Tis all very well to say you're a creature of habit, and that this be a bit of an upset, by reason of its sudden

falling out ; but what the mischief would you have ? ' Being, of course, a reasonable man, he soon rose to the situation, got accustomed to the idea of Mary as a wife, and took her for that purpose.

“ In a fortnight from the end of the sailor-men, they was tokened ; and a month later, with the dash and fire of youth, they plunged into matrimony. All Princetown was to the wedding pretty near ; and when that Alice Mumford came back to Brownberry, she heard as her old mistress was lifted up to be Mrs. Rowe, and on her honeymoon at that moment. And she likewise heard that Dunnabridge was to be let or sold ; because Mercy had decided to give it up and come to Princetown and throw in her lot with her husband's business.”

DUNNYBRIG'S BABY

DUNNYBRIG'S BABY

NAT BRADLEY opened the subject—him as had the weak-witted wife who died a bit ago. May had come again—a very cheerful, hopeful season, with the cuckoo hollering proper on the moor above Widcombe—now on Hameldon and now on Bonehill Rocks, and now along in the woods and nigh the river. And the kingcups was like fire by the stream side, and the bud breaking on every hand.

Upon the night I mention we was jolly enough at the 'Plume,' because we had seen a wedding in the morning, and a very nice woman had married a very good man.

Sam Bonus was there for one, and he'd been to the wedding with his concertina, and he gave us a fine flourish or two upon it in the course of the evening. And Gregory Snow was there, and he'd been to the feast also, and spent a thought too much time with the brown sherry wine. So he sat in a corner and smiled and frowned and tried to look wise, but kept his mouth shut.

Then Moses Butt came in with Uncle Tom Cobleigh on his arm, and old uncle he had grown two-double of late and as round as a beetle, along of his weight of years. But clever as need be still, and wide awake and sharp in his senses. Smoke he couldn't, because it hurt his tubes and made him cough, but he'd let down his three goes of gin and water with the best; and, to make up for baccy, he'd got to be a great man for snuff, which he carried loose in his waistcoat pocket. In fact, there was always a snuffy air

around the old blade, and I've known strangers to sneeze in fits after they've been telling with him for two or three minutes.

Then in came Peter Gurney, the farrier, and he was cheerful, too, along of good news from his son out to Africa ; so there was a pleasant enough feeling of peace and goodwill in the air ; but Johnny Rowland, as be sharp as a hawk, to see if his customers are happy, or if they ban't, detected that one amongst us wasn't in touch with the rest. He's very quick like that, is Johnny, and don't wish to see any man out in the cold in company.

So he spoke to Nat Bradley in a bantering spirit, because Nat, you see, had been silent all night. He wasn't one of our great talkers, but he usually took his share in the conversation ; and his opinions, such as they were, got as much attention as any other man's. In the first great excitement after his wife was called home, he'd talked of taking another, though the idea soon cooled off. I thought, perhaps, the wedding had revived it in his mind, but I was mistaken.

" Well, Nat," says Johnny Rowland, from behind the bar. " You be terrible quiet to-night. But no doubt you are thinking the more."

" I heard a strange thing three days ago," answered Bradley, " and it have took hold on me, and sticks in my mind very curious. It may be true, or it may not be true, but for my part I think it is, because such queer happenings can't well be invented. 'Twas your brother, Charles Turtle, said it," continues Nat, speaking to me at the time.

" If Charles told 'e," I answered, " then there's truth in it, for a more truth-loving man, after myself, I haven't neighboured with."

" Well," answered Nat, " he heard the tale from somebody else, and, in justice to your brother, he seemed doubt-

ful how far it might be trusted. You know Ben Coaker's shop—the carpenter. It haven't been used for undertaker's work since his grandfather died fifty year ago, and yet Ben swears that, dropping in there on his way home a week ago, to fetch his tobacco pipe, he heard the sound of blows overhead, and peeped up the stairs to the carpenter's shop, and seed the spectrum of his grandfather and a journeyman carpenter working away there after midnight. And they was making a monstrous coffin! The moon shined in the place, and Ben swore by all his Christian faith that he seed 'em; and, even while his hair stood up and the perspiration trickled down his spine, he wondered whatever sort of man they was building such a hugeous box for."

Nobody spoke after Bradley was done; then Uncle Cobleigh piped up. His little voice was sunk to a mere squeak now, owing to the shrinking of his speaking parts; but he always swore to his dying day that he'd took tenor to church in the 'thirties' of last century. And for all us could tell, he may have done so, because there wasn't nobody left alive to prove otherwise.

"Don't let's have no more talk about coffins, my dears," begs Uncle. "'Tis a little bit too personal when you'm in sight of three figures; and for my part, I'd rather tell about anything else. 'Tis too much like talking of sage and onions to a goose."

"I can tell you a tale of a coffin as won't hurt your feelings, Uncle, but quite the contrary," said Rowland from behind the bar. "It shows how the smallest things do bring about the biggest results, and how great a matter a little fire kindleth, in Bible words. And what I be going to tell about is very different from Bradley's tale. A happy story, in fact, with an ending to cheer us all, and make us take a better conceit of human nature in general."

Rowland poured his usual 'dry ginger,' for liquor in the true sense he never drank, and then he started on his yarn :

"The mother to the babby in my story was called Sibella John, and she comed of no common stock. Anyway, there was brains in the family, and her great-grandfather's tomb be in the churchyard to this day to show what a far-thinking and independent sort of a man he was. He made up his own tombstone verse afore he was took—a custom in the John family—and all men agreed that none invented a better afore or after. And none ever wrote a rhyme that showed their own true character so well as he did. The words ran like this, and they are worth repeating for the sake of those who have not met with them."

The innkeeper rehearsed the rhyme from the old grave-stone :

Pray for the soul of Gabriel John
 Who died in eighteen hundred and one.
 But if you'd rather let him alone
 It's all the same to Gabriel John
 Who died in eighteen hundred and one.

"That was the man," continued Rowland. "And 'tis a pretty good picture of his mind, in my opinion—a solid, fearless chap who ran his own show, and minded his own business, and did the Lord's will to the best of his power all his life. But his granddaughter was made of softer metal, and the blood in her had run through other channels and taken up different material. She was a gentle, kindly creature—well enough known to me, and to some others in Widecombe for that matter. And the course of true love didn't run smooth by long chalks with Sibella, because her heart was set on Bob Whitelock, the miller's boy, over to Babenay Mill ; but her father wanted for her to wed Silas Dunnybrig, the undertaker's son. Then, in the midst

of the flurry, with both men at her, and poor Sibella driven to death between 'em, what should happen but Dunnybrig's father popped off, and he was left with the business and clear two hundred pound a year! So 'twas said, and I don't think it can have been much less. And, of course, Sibella's father, Nicholas John, was all for the rich undertaker, and wouldn't hear a word for the poor miller's son.

"A pretty argument, you might say; and each man was able to make a very good case for that matter, because, if you come to think upon it, the world couldn't get on without either trade. Millers we must have so long as bread be made of wheat, and coffins we must have so long as all flesh is grass.

"Bob Whitelock stood out for his trade, and Silas Dunnybrig backed his, and Nicholas John decided for Dunnybrig, because he was richer and older, and more like to leave his wife and childer well provided for. The mystery was to know why Silas wanted a wife at all, because he was a hard, selfish young man in his youth; and he loved money better than any other treasure on earth or in heaven. But something about Sibella had took his better nature and lifted him above the love of pelf. So, at least, I think it must have been, though unkind folk said he wanted her because he knew she was soft and gentle and could be trod under foot, if need be, and would never dare to ax for more pennies than he was pleased to dole out. 'Twas a toss-up between a wife and a housekeeper, and he reckoned a wife would be cheaper in the long run. That's how a good many judged the man before he was married.

"But Whitelock belonged to a different breed. Not a spendthrift, nor anything like that, yet a chap much like his father—straight, easy and fair, ready to give and take, and fond of work and fond of play. As for money, he seed

no more in a shilling than twelve pence, and never thought that sixpence could do a shilling's work. He was a bad loser, and it galled him above a bit to find the girl wouldn't take him. He tried to wake her pluck, but unfortunately pluck wasn't Sibella's strong point. She was weak, and didn't honestly know her own mind between them. She liked 'em both, so her parents decided for her, and the upshot of it was that after a year of doubt Sibella took Silas Dunnybrig. Some fierce scenes there were, and Whitelock very near got the girl to change her mind and run away with him; but her mother watched her like a hawk, and so Bob had to be content with taking forty shillings or a month out of the undertaker. Since Sibella wouldn't go, her lover thrashed Silas to the truth of music one fine night in the churchyard. Then Bob runned away hissself, and when they went down to the mill with the warrant, all in solemn order and state to take him, his father had to explain that the young man was off, but none knew where.

“ For a longful time he kept away, and as soon as he was properly fled, of course, the girl wanted him back, and only him. But she'd lost her chance of happiness in that quarter, being like the many are—too weak to strike for their own salvation, even when it lies right afore their noses; and so in due course she took Silas, and the man, who had behaved very sensible and patient while she made up her mind, was glad to get her.

“ They wasn't a very happy pair, however, for a close, money-loving chap is generally hard all round, and not only over cash. Any lover-like affection Silas might have felt soon calmed down afore the ruling passion. He stinted and he saved; and he looked to it that Sibella Dunnybrig, as she was now, should do the like; and any fond fancy that they was going to be better off when their daughter

took him was soon blown out of the minds of Nicholas John and his wife after the event. For Silas had no use for them, nor anybody else without cash in their pockets. He was very jealous of his business, and liked the people to pass away regular and often, and never made no secret of his satisfaction when a hard winter brought work. He was no hypocrite, whatever else he might have been. A hard, business-like creature—terrible old for his age, and terrible likely to knock all the life out of a gentle and trusting woman, who wanted to love him if he'd let her. Some said he set about shortening Sibella's days 'with business and despatch,' according to his own advertisement; but that's not true. He liked her well enough—I'll go further and say he even loved her, but he didn't understand her view of life and her generous nature, because generosity, in his opinion, was a vice. He was rumoured to have kept her hungry once or twice, and undoubtedly the home held little happiness for the girl. But then came the glad news that a little undertaker was duly on the road. So we all hoped that the parents would soon be better friends, and reach a properer understanding.

"There was a good bit of doubt as to that, however, in my opinion, for the first time I named it to Silas Dunnybrig, and congratulated him very heartily upon it, after the coming event was common knowledge, all he answered was that time would show. 'But for my part,' he said, 'tis a bit of a nuisance to a man just making his way. In fact, 'tis a terrible handicap to be a father so soon; and for my part, I don't know where the money's coming from.'

"And I'm afraid Sibella went sobbing to her parents in secret more'n once during the next six months. Right out of luck, poor soul; and then, as if the future wasn't to make her busy enough, if she didn't go and get the whooping

ough a fortnight afore her babby was to be born ! Well, that meant trouble naturally, and the doctor—Dr. Parsons it was in them days, a very kindly and skilful man—he comed to Silas and talked to him, and gave him due notice that this was a very bad thing to have falled out for more reasons than one. ‘I must warn you, Dunnybrig,’ said the doctor, ‘that your child will be in great danger. It happens sometimes in a case like this that the little one be born with whooping-cough upon it ; and when that falls out, ’tis fifty to one but the infant dies. The little, new-born frame can’t stand against the disease at such a tender time. I’ve lost several that way,’ said Dr. Parsons ; ‘but I’m glad to say I’ve also saved a brave child once and again where the constitution was extra good. And I hope ’twill prove so in this case. You’ve a right to hope, but you mustn’t hope much. And on no account say one word of this to your missis, for that would be to lessen the chances a good deal. We must keep her up all we know that she shall be as well as possible against the great day.’

“So master Silas began to see that married life has its puzzles ; and then, though he grumbled and growled while there was nought to grumble at, the stuff the man was made of showed a bit afore real trouble, and he set his teeth and began to take thought for his offspring. You might think, after the bitter things he’d said to me and others, that he’d have been fairly resigned if Providence had snatched the child ; but on the contrary, now he valued it above all the world, and made a terrible upstore about it. His wife, of course, he didn’t tell, but he paid her a good bit of attention, though he didn’t forgive her for getting the whooping-cough at such a ticklish moment. Not that ’twas her fault, for she’d never had it afore, and the plague was reigning all through the village just then.

“ Well, in fulness of time the child came to be born, and 'twas a very fine boy ; but for all his fineness the doctor couldn't give no great hope. At first it seemed as if the infant was going to escape, but the medical man wasn't deceived, and after a week the fatal disorder showed itself. Then the parson came to baptise the child, which he did do, and 'twas called after its father. And then the battle began. The nurse they called in was a famous, skilful party, deep larned in babbies—Mrs. Smerdon by name ; and she done her best and left no stone unturned in all her great store of wisdom. 'Twas just a fight for life, and daily the little man got weaker till the crisis. A very grand sight, they tell me it was, to see that atom clenching his small hands and battling against death, till his tiny face growed black, and, time after time, everybody thought he was gone. He fought as brave as a regiment of soldiers for hissself, and took his food and slept like a top when the cruel cough would let him. And doctor was at him with all the latest inventions, for Dr. Parsons was one of them learned men who never let himself get behind the time in knowledge ; and Nurse Smerdon, she done her part most courageous likewise. She was a spacious woman, and lost two stone over the struggle, and never got it back again. A neighbour here and there, as understood, helped her also, for, of course, one couldn't do it all. But Silas, he was not a bit of use, and the only thing he did was to sit and cuss Providence, while he watched his son double up in the nurse's lap ; and then he'd hang on the sight and glare speechless, and wait for the blessed sound to come again as showed that the babby had catched enough breath to save his heart stopping. Of course, 'tis a shaking spectacle to see a new-born thing fighting so hard to live, and we, as know what life is, may well wonder if 'tis always worth such a battle. But the babby didn't know, and Nature

made him fight, and was on his side, too, as she always be on the side of the young.

“ However, it helped nobody for Silas to go trampling about making a row and saying wicked things. And then he must needs quarrel bitterly with his wife likewise, as if her breaking heart hadn’t enough to bear. In fact, he disgraced himself above a bit and couldn’t see that the matter was in the best possible hands, and that, come what might, his infant was a member of the Church, and an heir of glory.

“ They was only too thankful to get him out of the house, and twice he stopped in his workshop all night and everybody missed him very pleasantly, I’m sure. He couldn’t control himself, you see, and there came a night at last at the critical moment when all was in the balance, and the nurse strung up a bit and in no frame of mind to argue with a shameless male. So when Silas grumbled because she wanted another bottle of brandy for her own drinking, and told her that she lived on brandy and was a disgrace to Widecombe, Nurse Smerdon, who had grown thin over the job, as I told you, and had slept like a dog wi’ one eye open for ten days, answered back and gave master Silas the properest dressing down that ear of man ever tingled at. A fine and fearless creature she was, as knew human nature pretty well inside out, and quite understood the man and his qualities—good and bad alike. So she let loose on him, and took him through his career from the day his father died up to the present time, and spared nothing. She pointed out his love of money and his mean instincts and his selfishness and his cruel conduct to his wife. She told him that Sibella had more pluck in her little finger than he had in his whole lumping carcass. She showed him the inside of his heart and the ugly things there, and especially she made it clear to Silas what Sibella had been called upon to

suffer at his hands since his child was born. 'Twas like a hornet at him, and when she'd done, he just crept out of the house like a beaten dog and come in here to the ' Plume of Feathers ' and bought a five-shilling bottle of brandy and took it back hisself ! But he couldn't face the nurse no more, so he gave it to the servant maid for her, and then he sloaked off to his workshop and sat down there to think. He had sense, for all his lawless and greedy nature, and he'd got to love his babby with all his heart. And now he saw truth a bit through Nurse Smerdon's stinging words, and he began to be ashamed.

" He hadn't sat there above an hour when he felt the effects of all that woman had said working, like strong medicine, through his mind. And first he grew cruel sick with things in general, and then he grew cruel sick with himself. 'Twas just at that stage that he rose up and thought to go home again ; but he was stopped by running footsteps and he heard a yowling and a sniffing, and the maid of all work—Hannah Maine her name was—come up the ladder into his loft and screeched out 'twas all over.

" ' He's gone—he be dead—the li'l, tibby lamb be dead, master ! ' she cried out ; and then she went down the ladder again, weeping so loud as she knew how, to spread her bad news abroad.

" The man, who'd jumped to his feet, fell back as if he was shot ; and long he sat with his face on his arms upon the bench. But go home he could not then, for his soul wrestled with him, like Jacob with the angel, and it threw him down and broke him.

" A good two hour he sat there with his grief growing upon him. He pictured it all, you see—the nurse exhausted and thirsty ; the doctor sad to have failed ; his wife drowned in tears, and his little boy at peace. He raged then, and tramped the shavings a good while till very near

midnight ; and then he fell to thinking on Sibella and wondering how she bore up. That's where the bitterness came home, be sure, for remorse is an ugly customer ; and if them about to do evil only knowed what it tastes like, they'd think twice and again afore they courted it.

"The past came back over him then, and the picture that Nurse Smerdon had painted was tame to the picture the man painted for his own eyes. He saw it all—his bullying and blustering, and lack of understanding and sympathy. And he saw Sibella's patience and weakness, and the way she'd gone through the needless trouble that he put upon her day by day. He saw her strange look when he swore at her for getting the whooping-cough ; and he saw her again when, still too weak for such a thing she tried to help with the sick babby. He saw the struggle and the child doing his li'l best against the foe, but going down at last like the daisy in the hayfield. And he looked on into the future with his professional eye and saw the piteous funeral.

"You might think that would have shook him most of all ; but it didn't, because a man's business is his business, and it can be a mighty comfort to the heart, even in its darkest hour. Therefore, strange to say, queer consolation came to Silas, though you and me wouldn't have thought that it could be any consolation at all.

"The coming funeral was a sort of balm to his tortured and contrite soul. It offered a respite, and furnished work to distract his mind ; it even gave some relief to his cruel remorse. He assured himself that, without doubt, he had helped to kill his son, and that he would be told so by the nurse when he went home ; and he also felt terrible sure that Sibella—— There he broke off, because he couldn't think of her. In fact, he couldn't think no more about anything, so he fell back upon action. He took off his

coat and waistcoat, turned up his sleeves, lighted a brace of oil lamps, and set to work to make the babby's coffin.

"I suppose there ban't a man here but knows a time or two when work was his salvation. I'm sure I have—bachelor though I am—and if the lazy ones only knew what a tower of strength work may be in the hour of trial, they'd larn something, if 'twas only for that sure and certain rainy day. At any rate, Silas declared afterwards that nought but hard labour kept his wits from wandering just then. Another man would have gone back to comfort his wailing wife, no doubt; but too well he knowed that at such a time she'd suck no comfort from him. Instead there came a thought—half-sane, half-daft—that if he went afore her in the grey of morn with the most beautiful little coffin that wit of man could fashion, she'd see as he'd suffered too, and done the best that was left to do, and perhaps take it kindly and forgive him.

"He talked to hisself wildly while he worked, so he confessed after; and he told hisself that, of course, mother-like, his wife would want as precious a casket as could be made with hands for her poor little lost jewel; and he eased his feelings by swearing that the child should have as good as a royal prince's child. 'There's been a cruel lot of energy and hope and cash wasted on the babe a'ready,' he said to hisself, 'but I'll go through with it now, and the best skill and material as a robbed father can put into the job, that will I.'

"To work he went, and took the finest bit of oak in the shop—a piece long kept in secret for Squire Shillingford when the good man should come to want it; and Silas he toiled hour upon hour; he lined it with silk so snug and soft as a bird's nest; he finished it up home to the lid, and with all the skill of a master-undertaker, ran a pretty piece of blue cloth over it in shape of a cross after he'd

polished it, and made the fine grain shine like the sun.

“ ’Twas finished by the first glimmer of daylight, and even then the man wondered if more work could be put into it. But he’d made a brilliant masterpiece, without a doubt ; and, as the day dawned, for a moment the craftsman mastered the father, and he folded his arms and gazed upon it with a high satisfaction that only chilled off when he remembered who ’twas made for. Then he put on his clothes again and tidied hisself, and went down through the dimpsy light of the morning, dog-tired, wi’ the box under his arm hid in a cloth.

“ ’Twas not much after five o’clock, and he met nobody ; but reached his house—to see it sleeping in the row with its blinds down. But the place wasn’t made fast, so he goes through his garden and opes the door and walks in.

“ All was still as death, and he stood on his own door-mat for five minutes in doubt what to do. Then came a sound that he’d got to hate pretty terrible bad of late days, but now, happening when he never thought to hear it no more, all the music of heaven’s harps wouldn’t have struck so lovely and blessed upon the undertaker’s ear. For what he heard weren’t his wife’s little voice, nor yet Nurse Smerdon’s big one, but just the long-drawn, familiar croak and catch of his baby boy fighting for air against the whooping-cough. ’Twas a bit of a shock to the man, no doubt, and he falled against the umbrella-stand, and stood propped up for half a minute. Then he went in the room and found the air full of chemical stuff from a burning lamp which was the doctor’s latest idea, and Nurse Smerdon with his son on her lap afore the fire as usual.

“ ‘ Good God ! ’ whispered Silas, ‘ you don’t say he’s alive ? ’

“ ‘ Of course he’s alive, and he’s going to bide alive if I know anything about him,’ she said. ‘ You’d best get

to your wife. She'm fretting for you, the poor fool. But for my part, if I was your wife, I'd only fret when you was home.'

"He sat down all of a heap, and stared at his child as if he'd seen a spectrum. Then he let the box go from under his arm, and the cover comed off and the shining thing lay exposed upon the floor, wi' cancell light making it red o' one side, and daylight making it white t'other.

"Nurse Smerdon was a good bit put out when she seed what he'd fetch'd along; but she wasn't so much astonished as you might think.

"'You unlucky wretch!' she said. 'What the mischief have you been up to now?'

"He was limp and helpless still, but a hard man like him soon began to get his nerve back.

"'Hannah Maine rushed in the shop last night and told me he was a goner. And I was that strung up about it that nothing would do but I must get to work there and then. Thank the watching Lord—and you—that he ban't dead; but a fact be a fact, and there's the thing. A masterpiece I've made for him. And my wife must see it, for 'twill tell her better than any power of words what I've been through. 'Twill help her to forgive me. And—and—where's that blasted girl? I'll wring her neck anyhow!'

"Nurse Smerdon saw how the land lay, and acted with her usual command over men.

"'The girl's in bed. Wring her neck certainly as soon as she's up—I won't prevent you—but you've got to think of your missis first. She shall know all about what you've been through in good time, but you mustn't go showing her that thing just now. She ban't in a frame of mind to admire it. 'Tis like this: she took the child for five minutes last night and, as ill luck would have it, he got a

bad choke in her arms, and turned so purple as a sloe. And she thought 'twas the end—poor woman. "He's gone! He's dead! 'Tis all over wi' un!" she screamed; and the girl thought it was true, and you know that girl. Off she must bolt, like the senseless mumphead she is; and while I was getting the child round, she was traapsing all over Widecombe telling the parish that little Silas Dunnybrig was dead. And she come to you first, no doubt. When she returned she heard me, and I sent her off to unsay her evil news, but she forgot you seemingly—just the one she ought to have minded first. However, these things don't fall out by chance, and you'll do well not to be too hard on the Lord's chosen tool. He'll often let an idiot work for Him—according to His mysterious ways. You've had your dose by the look of you. And now you'd better get that affair out of the way and go to your wife. She's asleep, else she'd have been down house at the sound of your voice. Don't wake her, but slip in beside her, so quiet as you can, and when she waketh tell her the babby's better.'

" 'Better!' cries Silas.

" 'Ess fay—a tidy bit, if I've got eyes. He's come to stop, as I always knowed he had. He'll be a hard nut like you, I shouldn't wonder, though I hope not. Now pack that glittering horror out of sight, and don't you tell nobody about it, for there's lots would say 'twas bound to bring cruel, bad luck—your wife's people among the number.'

" With that, Silas Dunnybrig, after he'd kissed his sleeping infant, went off and locked up the coffin in his toolshed at the bottom of the garden.

" His wife was awake when he got to her, and she had the amazing experience of hearing her husband's voice tremble when he told her the boy was a lot better and was going to live. She soon got out of him what he'd suffered—

though not what he'd done—and she forgave everything, and just burned to comfort him and make up to him for his terrible scare. But 'twas a very good thing to have happened, because what took place in the man's nature that night left its mark, and he growed a very fairly kind sort of chap after.

“ 'Twas not till six months later that Sibella Dunnybrig heard the whole truth, and saw his night's work one morning when she went up in the shop. And it made her love him most steadfast. In fact, they settled down into what people call a pattern husband and wife. They had five harmless, nice childer—girls, barring the first—but he, of course, always stood highest in his mother's heart.”

GAFFER

GAFFER

I

“**Y**OU ax me why for I’ve got yonder yellow tabby cat set up in a case like life, wi’ his eyes a-shining, and his whiskers a-bristling, and his tail up on the salute, just for all the world as he’ve come to welcome me of a morning, scores and scores of times, in life. And that shows very clear you’m a foreigner, because there ban’t a man nor woman nor child in Widcombe as couldn’t give you the reason.

“No common cat him, and from the day I happened down by the river, when Tom Pierce was going to drown five chets, to the day he died, my ‘Gaffer,’ as I called him, was more like a brother to me than a dumb animal without a soul. I seed a mustard-coloured kitten among the lot that Pierce meant to throw in the river, and so I says : ‘If you’ll let that creature bide with its mother, I’ll take it off your hands presently, Tom, for ’tis just the cat I’m wanting, and I like the colour of him.’ And so he did, and come ’twas old enough, I took him ; and for seventeen years it bided along with me and was a faithful friend and an understanding companion. But even that wouldn’t have been quite enough for me to have him stuffed so handsome ; but the reason for that I can tell you if you mind to hear it. ’Tis a terrible queer story, and there’s a murder in it, and there might have been two, but for that fine chap in the glass case there.

“’Tis a tale of three farms, you may say, and twenty

years ago. Joe Derry, he was at Nine Elms, under Dartmoor; and Samuel Black had another freehold that ran up to Derry's hedges, and was called Glebe Farm; and then, next to Glebe, I came and had a poor little place of ten acres, all told, which was left to me when my Uncle Fabian Crymes died. Can't say as I ever got the full value of Stone End out of the land, but it give me something to do; and when I heard about it I left my calling, which was a fisherman's, and come to Widecombe-in-the-Moor, and settled to farming.

"Well, there was us three; Joe Derry, a cheerful married man with three childer at Nine Elms; and me, an old bachelor, but cheerful, too, at Stone End; and, betwixt us, Samuel Black at Glebe Farm, a man neither cheerful nor friendly, along of his cursed covetousness. Land hunger was eating him alive, you might say. 'Tis a very uncommon complaint on Dartmoor, because most of the Forest belongs to Duchy, and Duchy won't part with a yard, so the tenants know 'tis vain to hunger for possession; but here and there, up and about, be farms over which the Duchy has no control; and these have belonged to Moor folk time out of mind. 'Tenement Farms,' they be called, and they'm terrible ancient, as you may see by the walls and thatches of 'em.

"By chance here was three of these farms in a row, and when Samuel Black came to Widecombe and bought the Glebe, the first thing he done was to begin casting round how he could collar t'others and roll 'em all into one. He tried my uncle first afore my time, but I'd always been a good nephew to the old bird, and so he told Samuel that the farm was to come to me. And then, when I arrived, Black had a dash at me, and did his utmost to make me part. But 'Why for should I?' I axed him. 'I want a home and a bit of work, and the people round here know

me, and, in a word, I don't want to sell, and I will not.' 'Twas the same with Joe Derry. He owned Nine Elms and didn't mean to part from it, even at its value ; because he counted for his son to follow him there and hand the place on in his turn, as Joe's father had handed it to him.

" I must set out all this clear, else the story won't run suent. But there it stood, and me and Derry and Derry's wife and family was very good friends ; and, as for Samuel Black, we couldn't much like him, because he was a cold, heartless pattern of man, always playing for his own hand, and never caring a straw about the hopes and wishes of other people. Us didn't judge him, but us didn't like him—in fact, nobody didn't.

" When he found he couldn't make no terms for my land or for Joe's, he was soon off us both, and seemed to think we'd done him an injury ; but what always troubled me was that Joe's eldest son, Will Derry, a very nice chap twenty year old, got friendly with Samuel Black, and always stuck up for him against his father. This here Will was good-hearted, but soft and rather wild ; and Black soon found out how terrible fond he was of sporting, and tempted him away from his work a bit too frequent, and after a time actually got to make a little feeling between Will and his father.

" But things hadn't come to harm, and when the awful trouble fell on the Derrys, nobody took it more to heart than Will.

" One more name I must name as will come into the tale, and then I can go on with the telling. And that was Tom Pierce, an old sailor-man. Ugly as sin was Tom. He'd got frostbitten going round the Horn, and he'd got his left flipper mangled in a donkey-engine, and he'd suffered from a breaking rope as had parted and cut his face to the bone. And he turned up at Widecombe, after thirty years in the

mercantile marine, just so poor as he was when he ran away to sea as a boy, rather than go to school and learn his lessons. A little man he was, with grisly hair and jackdaw eyes, and a sort of a jackdaw way with him, too. They said he was sly and not to be relied upon, and certainly the yarns he told of the wonders of the deep were largely lies, as I could have vouched for, though too well-mannered to do it. But there 'twas : him being a sailor-man, I naturally got to like him, and us often had a tell, and he often came in my home and spent the evening and yarned over our grog. He worked as cowman for Joe Derry, and was very clever at it ; but few liked him, and he hadn't got a real friend in Widecombe till I came there. 'Twas Tom as took the kittens to drown 'em, and I will say as a thing against him, that he had an uncanny liking for killing, and would rise any morning with light to slay a pig or beast. Yet a kindly and humorous man he seemed to me. Bad fortune hadn't soured him. He was fond of the ladies and good to the childer. He became quite a crusted character at Widecombe, and the things he said was long remembered after he went.

“So the matter stood when, one day in spring, who should rush over to me, where I was tramping a field and shedding out a fertiliser over mangold seed, but Tom himself.

“‘For God's sake come over to Nine Elms,’ he said. ‘Here's the master have done away with hisself, and his missis be gone mad!’

“Of course I thought he was making too terrible much of it, as folk do in such cases, and I tried to calm him down as we runned back together ; but he weren't far out, and I never want to see a more tragical come-along-of-it than what met me at poor Derry's farm that spring morning.

“There was Joe in the kitchen on his back on the floor,

so dead as a nit, and his wife screeching like a person on fire, and his younger childer yowling round about. Two men had run in, but they couldn't do nothing, because there was nothing to do.

“ Young Will Derry was gone off riding for the doctor and a maiden had runned for parson ; but I could see with half an eye that neither one nor t'other was going to be any use to Joe.

“ Tom Pierce knowed the most about it, though that was little enough. His master was in the habit of coming in of a morning for a crust and a drop of drink. He did it regular betwixt ten and eleven of the clock, and his missus always had a mouthful of bread and meat at that hour waiting for him in the opeway. He'd take 'em and then go in to his whiskey bottle and have a dram, and then off again. Well, so far as Pierce's story went, Joe came in as usual, ate his sandwich, and went for his nip. Tom was working two fields off, and being a drouthy morning, he'd set down his pick and was coming to take a drop along with poor Derry. For him and Derry was the best o' friends, and farmer would often ask Tom to bide and share a bit or sup with him. But, just as Pierce comed in the house, he heard a cruel groan, and there was Derry, down on the ground, rolling over and over. He'd took his drink seemingly and dropped the minute after. So Tom cries out to missis, who was in the dairy, and she runs in to see her husband fighting for life and drumming with his heels on the stone floor of the kitchen.

“ When I'd helped with the poor clay, and a female or two from the village was got along with Mrs. Derry, and a policeman comed in and locked up the kitchen till the authorities were sent for, I axed Tom why for he'd said as Joe had killed hissself, and he said that 'twas his first thought, and surely naught else could have happened.

“ ‘The man’s took poison,’ he said. ‘ ’Twas easy to see by the death he died as poison was working in his inside, for ’twas just that way died a poor Dago as I sailed with on my last voyage. He took a swig out of a bottle in captain’s cabin in the dark, thinking to get a drop of grog free afore the old man came back ; but he got on to the wrong bottle, and let down some stuff as the skipper kept to rub into his rheumatism ; so all the poor toad got was a free pass into eternity. And that’s what have happed to Joe Derry. And what he have took will have to be seen to.’

“ Then Tom was for looking at the bottle on the kitchen table, but the policeman wouldn’t so much as let him smell it. ’Twas the full majesty of the law then ; and for my part I never properly understood what a great thing law was till that awful morning. For up stood James Madders—a boy as I’d known afore he was short-coated—and there, against his blue, two old, wise men like me and Pierce, were as nothing. The law was behind him, you see, and, he kept that cool, and firm, and watchful, that for my part I felt a very great respect for him, and wasn’t at all surprised when in after life they lifted him up to be inspector of the district.

“ Well, the truth about poor Joe came out in due course, as far as mortal man could tell. But a lot was hidden from his fellow-creatures even then ; because, though it presently appeared very clear that he’d poisoned himself with malice aforethought, yet the why and the wherefore none could see at all. Everything was done decently and in order, and the crowner sat and the people gave evidence, and they brought it in *felo de se*, because the man’s mind was known to be as clear as a bell. And for my part I think it ought to have been ‘ the act of God,’ and a good few people thought the same ; because how can you say a man have killed

hissel if there ban't one jot or tittle of reason in the world why for he should have done it ?

“ What they found was this. The whiskey was sweet and proper, and the water he took along with it was sweet and proper ; but the glass he'd drunk out of had a touch of poison in it, and Joe hissel had a good drop of poison in him. Then the question was, what were the poison, and it came out to be a sort of stuff used for dressing foot-rot in sheep. There was a tin of it 'pon top of a cupboard in Joe's little outhouse, where he kept his tools and cautcheries ; and the tin was fresh opened and a good drop was gone. So the theory built up was that Joe had come in and ate his bread and meat, and then took his glass and gone and got a drop of the poison and swigged it off, and took a stiff whiskey 'pon top of it.

“ Of course, the clever people had all sorts of ideas on the subject, but nothing came of 'em, and in the end poor Derry was buried on Chrisomer's Hill in the churchyard—a spot where unbaptised childer and suicides was put in the old days. But our parson, to show himself a man above small views, read the full service over him, and didn't maim the rite by a hair. For parson took a mighty keen interest in the case of Joe Derry from the first ; and he always held to it that a cheerful, happy, and prosperous man like Joe would never have shortened his days that way. Besides, Joe was his own churchwarden, and as good a Christian as ever kneeled afore his Maker. So he got Christian burial, and never was known such a throng in our burying-place before when he sank into the pit.

II

“ Well, the great tragedy of poor Joe was presently

forgot, like all such things be ; but it brought large changes, and one man had his will by it.

“ Young William Derry reached the age of one-and-twenty in less than a year after his father’s death, and then what did he do but the very last thing on earth that his dead father would have wished ? He sold Nine Elms, lock, stock, and barrel, to Samuel Black, and I, for one, was properly ’mazed to hear of such a deed. In fact, I went red hot to the man’s mother, and begged to be told that ’twas a lie ; but she confirmed the tale, and, what’s more, she knowed a lot behind the scenes, and wasn’t at all surprised.

“ ‘ William,’ said she to me, ‘ be one of the weak sort, and time and again did I pray master to tie up his money against the boy till he growed to man’s estate. “ At twenty-one,” said I, “ he’ll be no better’n what he is now, and that’s a child ; but a child’s head on a man’s body makes for mischief, and I pray you, Joe, to leave the farm and everything in my keeping till our Will’s turned thirty ; for well I know he won’t have no more sense than a goose afore that age.” So I spoke to my dear chap ; but he wouldn’t give ear to me. Little he knowed. “ I shan’t be gone myself till William’s growed up,” he used to say. And so, when he was cut off, my boy—all heart and no head—had everything. And you can guess what next. Yonder man, who has been hungering for this place ever since he comed here, found William a rush in his hands. As ill luck would have it, too, Bill have gone daft on Black’s niece—that flaxen, smooth-voiced, grey-eyed girl that come here a bit ago from Lord knows where ; and now my boy be going to be tokened to her, and Black is to have the farm. ’Tis all a trap, and the last straw on my shoulders, God He knows.’

“ Such was the story the poor, sad woman_told me, and

I comforted her as best I could. But I heard the tale all over again in much the same words from Tom Pierce the same evening.

“ ‘ The craft of him be like the wisdom of God—past understanding,’ says Tom over a drop of drink in my place. ‘ There’s no doubt he planned this from the outset, and meant to get the farm out of Master Will sooner or later.’

“ Then Tom talked a bit about himself.

“ ‘ I can’t abide Black,’ he said ; ‘ but a man must have a master, and I’m used to the ways of this place, and I should be sorry to lose your friendship ; so I’m disposed to bide. In fact, I’ve ordained to do so ; and Black offers me a pound a week to stop at Nine Elms, though it ban’t to be called “ Nine Elms,” no more. ’Tis all to be swallowed up in the Glebe Farm. However, if you’ll find work for me here, I’d a long sight sooner come to you.’

“ But I hadn’t got no use for Tom in my little bit of a place, and told him so.

“ ‘ Us’ll always be friends, if you please, Pierce,’ I said ; ‘ but you know Stone End. There’s no work for you here, and no money neither.’

“ So he went his way, and worked on along with Samuel Black.

“ They quarrelled a good bit, and ’twas a joke in the village that Tom give notice every pay-day ; but he had very good money, and, after a bit, Black raised it by half a crown ; so the man stopped, though he never had much good to say of his master. And as for William Derry, the yellow-haired girl married him, and bided with him at Okehampton for two years till his money was all spent ; then she runned away with a chap from Okehampton Artillery Camp—a gentleman,’ twas said, and she got better luck than she deserved, by all accounts ; while, as for Will,

he lived along with his broken-down mother and a sister for a good bit, then he went to Canada, and haven't been no more heard of up to the present time.

“ Well, Samuel Black did great things with his new farm, of course, and presently he was at me again for my little bit, so as he might have all of his in a ring fence. Daft he was over it—not like a sane man. It grew to master him, and I'd see him on his fat acres looking at my lean ones, like a hungry dog looks at a butcher's tray. A right down, regular Naboth's vineyard they was to him.

“ He comed in one day when I was going round, with Gaffer walking beside me, for the cat would follow me like a dog sometimes when a fancy took him to do it, and he—Black, I mean—began again about the farm. Little did I think that I was playing with my own life as I talked to him. But so 'twas, and I said a thing so innocent and kindly as any man might wish to hear ; yet while I said it, if you'll believe me, I was signing my own death warrant !

“ ‘ I'm sick to death of telling you as I can't part with the farm, neighbour,' I says to Black, ‘ but since you're that terrible set upon it, and life's so short, I'll serve you if I can. You'm not up home five-and-fifty years old yet and can afford to wait a bit, surely ; but I'm seventy-two, and I shall certainly be gone twenty year afore 'tis your turn. And this I'll do ; I'll set down in lawyer's language that when I die, Stone End shall be sold to you ; and more I can't do than that.’

“ Well, you'd think that any man would have been properly obliged ; but Black went moody and thoughtful and the first thing he axed was if I'd mind for him to begin farming his own way on my place from that time forward ! And I got niffed at that, and said that if 'twas all one to

him, I'd be master so long as I was above ground. Surely that weren't too much to bargain for.

“ ‘ And what's more,’ I said, ‘ since you be so hard, I'll show my teeth, too ; and I'll say this : I must have a bit on account afore I promise you the farm. I've got no heirs nearer than a chap up beyond Exeter, who didn't treat me well, and won't be the richer by my death ; so, if you're to have the farm presently, I'll have a bit of the price now. You can begin paying for it so soon as you please.’

“ 'Twas rather a dashing thing for a mild old man like me to say ; but Black, he quite saw the point of that, and we went to a lawyer and fixed it all up proper.

“ It fell out pretty well for me too, save that I had a creepy sort of feeling ever after that Sam Black wished me dead whenever he set eyes upon me ; and Pierce told me 'twas so.

“ Tom and me saw a good bit of each other just about this time ; and he oped my eyes to Black and the hardness of the man in many ways.

“ ‘ I keep my ears cocked,’ he said, ‘ and I hear things. 'Twould be libel, and he might have me in prison if I was to say what I have heard him tell ; but to you, as one who have treated me very kind, I'll say this : you've got no friend in Samuel Black, and he won't put on no mourning the day you drop. 'Tis your own fault, for such as him, with his consuming hunger for the land, can't help looking forward to the time when Stone End comes to be his own, and the great wish and hope of his life is fulfilled.’

“ I poured out Tom another glass of gin, for we was at my place one winter's evening when he told me this.

“ ‘ All I can say is that I'm very glad I've got a friend in that man's house,’ I told him ; ‘ I ban't so young as I was, and 'tish't a comfortable thing to have a ferocious

sort of man like Black hungering to get you underground. God's my judge,' I said to Pierce, 'but, old as I am, I'd go up to the man in the street and pull his nose if I thought he harboured any dirty trick against me. Such a thing ought to be shown up,' I said.

"'Keep out of his way, and don't be too long a-dying,' was all that Pierce answered in return; and from that hour I got a sort of real dislike to Samuel Black.

"We talked on a good bit that night, and well I remember all we said, because 'twas the very last time I ever had a drink with Tom Pierce. He went off at his usual hour of ten o'clock, and I let him out o' the house, and, according to his rule, Gaffer went out at the same time.

"For he was a cat as ran his life by rule, and from the time I let him in of a morning to the time I let him out of a night, he did the same things each day—ate and drank and washed his face and took the air, all just so and regular as clockwork. A lesson he was to us irregular humans. As to his nights, he'd sown his wild oats ten year afore this adventure, and I never heard no bad accounts of him from anybody. A fine, vigorous, upstanding cat, and he fetched a regular streak of his own beautiful marmalade colour into the district; for until his time 'twas never seen, you might say, but afore he struck work and took to the chimney corner, there wasn't a house hardly in the village without a nice yellow cat going about it. A beautiful warm colour, as I always held, and a great addition to the cats of the neighbourhood.

"Well, I saw Tom Pierce down to my wicket, for 'twas a soft night with a moon showing over the Moor and a plum wind offering to bring up rain; and then I seed Gaffer's tail wave as he jumped over a fence and went off on his business or pleasure; and then to bed I took myself,

little thinking what manner of a night I was going to spend. But my prayers I prayed as usual—short and to the point—though I'd have made 'em a good size longer that night if I'd known how much I was to stand in need of 'em afore the morning.

“ I always slept with my door on the jar, and how long I'd done so that night I couldn't say ; but it must have been three or four hour at the least when I woke suddint to feel a hand, as I thought, upon the bed. I was too sleepy to cry out, but just laid and wondered what in thunder was moving in my chamber ; and then slowly, out of the dark, stood up something still darker, and I seed 'twas a great cat what had got on my bed and was padding wi' his fore paws, as their wont is afore they roll around and go off to sleep. Then I heard the Gaffer's purr, which was very loud even by day, but in the silence of night he 'peared to be humming like a steam saw, and all the time he was going on keeping time with his paws. Then he comed up to me and rubbed his cold, wet nose against my whiskers and tried for to get in the bed.

“ Well, my waking senses worked very slow, but gradually I put two and two together and made a very ugly four of 'em. I lived alone, you must know, for I was a very independent old man in them days, and I didn't want a woman round me till I was eighty-two. Yes, I lived alone, and accordingly I said to myself :

“ ‘ Here's the cat as I seed go over the fence into my potato patch a bit back-along. And how the mischief did he get into the house again ? ’

“ I kept pretty still then and stroked Gaffer and made him come in the bed, and lie down. Then I went on arguing it out. I said :

“ ‘ He couldn't have come in single-handed, so 'tis sartain he found a door or window open.’

“ Then I said, still working it out, you see :

“ ‘ If there’s a door or window opened, it didn’t happen without hands, and the man who have done it ban’t no friend of mine.’

“ When I got that far, I thought ’twas time I rose up and went down house. And so I did ; but very clever and quiet, for I didn’t want to run on some ferocious, dare-devil of a fellow in my night-shirt, wi’ nothing to my hand but a hobnail boot and no neighbours nearer than the Glebe.

“ So I drew on my trousers and crept out of my room to the stairs. They was of stone and opened from my bed-chamber straight down into the kitchen. I went out on the landing, but I didn’t go no further, for there was a light below and a man held it. I got down on my belly then and just put my head over the edge of the top step and watched the villain.

“ And if I hadn’t been lying flat, ’tis odds but I should have fallen when I marked who ’twas. For there stood Tom Pierce, just as he was afore he left me a few hours back-along—all but his shoes. He’d took them off for silence, and silent as a spider he was. To the cupboard he went and fetched out my gin bottle. ’Twas a funny thing to do, and a funny way to come for a drink to a man as had just stood him three—at least, so it looked to me for a minute ; but I very soon found that he wasn’t come to take nothing out of my bottle, but to put something in. He opened it, and then fetched a physic phial of blue glass from his pocket and poured the contents into my bottle. Then he put everything in its place, shut the cupboard, drew on his shoes, and prepared to go on his way.

“ My hair—what scant rags of it that time had left—properly stood on end before the sight, for, somehow, like

a flash, I saw past and future all in that one terrible sight of Pierce putting back my bottle in its place. And then I seed myself drinking and rolling over and over on the stones, like what poor Derry did. And I could a'most feel the poison working in me, and I very near cried out in my horror as I lay there a-glaring.

“And the next feeling I got was to be terrible vexed with Tom Pierce. For two pins I'd have gone down then and there and hit him over his wicked head and knocked him senseless, and bound him with ropes and given him over to the law. But I didn't do that. My brains worked something wonderful, and I just kept there quiet till he'd finished. Then he went away as he'd come, and left death behind for the man as had never done him nought but kindness for three years.

“I could have wept to think of such a right down bad un in our midst, and my feelings were so cruel cut up over it that I couldn't collect 'em. Tom, he shut the kitchen window after him very clever—for 'twas that way he come in—and he even drawed the latch back in its place with a bit of wire after he had gone through, for so I found it next morning. Then, when I guessed he was safely away to his own place, I went down and lighted the fire and brewed myself a strong dish of tea. I felt to want something, I assure you, and I couldn't go back to bed no more after such an adventure, for I'm sure I shouldn't have slept again that night. And as a small thing, yet showing how my mind was worked up to fever pitch, I went in the larder and fetched out half a rabbit pie and gived it to the cat as a thank-offering. He couldn't believe his luck, of course, but he didn't waste time wondering, and no doubt in his cat's mind he thought that he'd done a very clever night's work. Which he had done, I'm sure, because if he hadn't comed in, I shouldn't have waked up; and if I

hadn't waked up, I should have gone to my gin bottle as usual, and so been a dead man out of mind afore noon of the next day.

III

"Well, 'twas many sizes too large a puzzle for me, as you may think, and I cast about what to do. First, I thought of parson, but he was a man of peace; then I thought of farmer Black, but I couldn't feel like telling him, because I knowed in his hard heart he'd have felt so dreadful sorry that the worst hadn't happened. And then I remembered policeman Madders and how clever he was. So finally I ordained to tell him about it. He was terrible interested, and his policeman's mind saw a lot more in the affair than I could. In fact, the way he put two and two together was most amazing. 'Twas like a piece out of a newspaper to hear him, and yet for my life I couldn't see but what he might be right.

"James Madders listened to every word without saying another, and when I'd quite done, he told me what he thought.

"'There's a bigger than Tom Pierce behind this,' " he began.

"'Too well I know it,' I said, 'and his name's the devil.'

"'His name's Samuel Black,' answers Madders. 'There's a terrible lot of light let into things by this job. Look at it. First Black wants Derry's farm, and he finds that he can get it easy enough through Bill Derry, but that the father won't part. So what happens? Joe Derry dies in a very mysterious manner. And who knows most about it? This here anointed scoundrel, Tom Pierce. And what did he do? Why, he treated Derry's bottle of whiskey like he treated your bottle of gin, and so soon as

Derry had taken his dose, the man, who was on the spot, changed the whiskey bottle. 'Tis clear as light. So Derry drops and his son reigns and Black gets the farm inside a twelvemonth. Then Pierce goes to the man who put him up to this crime, and now 'tis your turn, and Black at this moment reckons that you'll be carried out of Stone End feet first afore Sunday.'

"I gasped to hear him, and the sweat pretty well flowed in a stream off of me.

"'Ban't no good your shivering,' says Madders; 'the thing is to know what next.'

"I couldn't help him more than the dead; but to show you the size of the young man's mind, he decided that he'd go for Black straight away. He put it afore his inspector, and that night both Black and Tom Pierce were in quod.

"'Twas a very horrible thing altogether to happen to such a mild-mannered man as me; but I had to go through with it, and Pierce made a clean breast of it, being advised by his lawyer so to do. He told a long story, beginning from the day he came into Widecombe dead beat and down on his luck. And Black had catched him robbing his turnip field and talked to him. And though presently Mr. Derry had given Pierce work to oblige Black, Tom was secretly working for Black from the beginning, and murder was the job that Black set him.

"It all filled columns of the papers and was the wonder of the countryside, as you may suppose. Pierce showed how right Madders had been in the matter of Derry, for he'd poisoned the farmer in his whiskey just as the policeman described, and then he'd put clean whisky in the place of the poisoned bottle and broke the other in the yard before he called for help. And as for his plans with me, he'd planted an opened tin of sheep-rot mixture in an out-house alongside my place, and trusted to do as he'd done

afore, and be about at the right moment to move my gin bottle in time. In fact, he came over with a message from Black the very next morning, and had trusted that I'd ask him in to have a drink, so that he'd see me poisoned. And then he intended to change the bottle and nip off and leave other people to find me. But of course I knowed too much for that, and all he found was my kitchen empty and my cupboard empty, for I took the bottle with me when I went to James Madders.

"The tongues wagged, I warn you, and both men was committed for trial, and the amount of indecent fuss that the folk made over me and my cat you never would believe.

"But the excitement died out all of a sudden, much to the disappointment of Widecombe, because Samuel Black took his life in prison up to Exeter three days afore the Assizes. So there was an end of him and his plots and plans, poor, rash creature; while as for Tom Pierce, the marvellous clever young lawyer chap that took up his case—for the sake of the advertisement, 'twas said—managed to fetch him in weak in his intellects, and so he was sent to Broadmoor in due course. Some said he was to have fifty pound for doing away with me, but I never could believe that Black offered such a figure as that.

"And Gaffer comed in for his share of applause, I promise you. But he just went his own way and thought nothing of it, and he lived to fulness of years and died like a gentleman when his turn came, as I hope we all shall."

THE RED RIDING-HOODS

THE RED RIDING-HOODS

I

OVER snow-clad Dartmoor rode a maiden on a black horse. The day was Christmas Eve, and the girl carried a basket of good fare to certain humble folk who, but for her thought, must have made their Christmas meal off barley bread, dripping, and herb tea. In a spot removed from human haunts an ancient couple, now past work, resided together, and it was the pleasure of Joan Penrose, their old master's daughter, to throw some sunshine upon the winter of their days.

Dartmoor stretched around about her, sheeted in twilight grey, yet lit by the snow-blink to a strange pallor. Tors lifted their pinnacles above the universal white; a mournful silence reigned, and not one sign of life but the smoking horse and the girl upon it marked that huge scene. Joan proceeded radiantly upon her mission. Her red riding-hood made a brilliant splash of colour against the snow, fitted tightly about her pretty face, and snugly covered her body. She was dark, with black eyes, full lips, and a round chin that spoke of character. Her present mission denoted both a warm heart and some physical bravery; but the Moor she knew and trusted in all its moods. She belonged to it, and was born upon it. This desert had rounded her maiden years, and, without ache of mind or body, had brought her happily to womanhood. Now she was eighteen, and felt life to be a splendid thing. She could read and write, though such accomplishments were rare for a farmer's daughter in her youth; all interested her, and she showed like eagerness toward her father's business upon

Dartmoor, to the affairs of her own little sphere, and to the doings of her nation, that fought just then with France and with America.

Where she rode Joan could perceive far off a grey and ghostly circle stretched upon the snow beneath distant hills ; and she knew that it was the war prison of Princetown, and that within it pined many thousands of Americans and of French, until peace should return to the world.

With her mother Joan sometimes attended the prison markets, and as she passed forward over the snowy hills on Christmas Eve, her mind dwelt upon the ragged sufferers, her eyes clouded a little to think of the cold that now tortured them, and of the diseases that daily struck them down.

From this mournful reverie the girl was wakened by a spectacle immediately in her path. Propped against a stone appeared a strange, motionless, ragged object ; and first Joan thought that she had found a scarecrow, and then she saw that the thing was a human being.

Her horse started, approached cautiously, bent its neck and sniffed ; whereupon the figure opened dull eyes and shook the snow off his head.

“ Go,” he said feebly. “ Let me pass in peace. If you have a heart, leave me.”

“ Oh, Jimmery ! you’re the American prisoner who escaped two days ago, afore the snow came ! ” cried Joan.

He nodded. “ Two days ? I had thought it fifty. Go to Princetown, if you must. Three pounds will be your reward to give me up. But leave the going until to-morrow ; then I shall have escaped from the reach of men.”

“ You would be dead,” she declared.

“ I hope so,” he answered.

The man was rather below middle stature. His face glistened pale as the snow, but four days’ growth of black

beard rendered him uncouth. His eyes blazed brightly, but all strength had departed from him, and in his tattered and torn habiliments and physical misery he looked woebegone indeed.

“Go,” he continued. “Let me sleep my life away and wake elsewhere.”

For answer Joan dismounted and approached him. “’Tis a gert adventure, but I must do what’s right.”

“You’ll give me up?” He almost smiled as he said it.

“No, fay! ban’t my business; but I’ll do what a girl may for a man in trouble.”

She opened her basket and took a cake from it. He had snatched it before she could look round, and devoured a part ravenously. Then, at some cost, he stopped eating, so that he might empty his mouth and speak.

“For God’s sake, forgive me. I’m a starving beast, not a man.”

“’Tis natural. Keep on eating. Here’s a pasty wi’ good meat in it; an’ I’ve got a bottle of sloe gin. ’Twill put life in ’e.”

Clad, fed, and in his right mind, the man had been good to look upon. Joan particularly noted his hands; they were thin and torn, but beautifully modelled.

“Drink,” she said. “Now you’ll live an’ not die; an’ I’m glad.”

He saw the brown face close to his, where she knelt and held the bottle to him. He looked at her dreamily. “What red-coated fairy thing are you, to come thus out of this cruel desert to a dying man?”

“No fairy me—only Job Penrose’s darter, from Sherberton Farm down-along. An’ there you’ve got to come this minute, ’pon my black horse.”

“Don’t ask it. I cannot return into life now. I’ll die blessing you.”

Joan shook her head. "Drink," she said, "an' you'll have strength to mount. My gert horse will bear the twain of us ; an' I'll be the man for once an' sit first, an' you must ride pillion behind the saddle."

"Consider. You may be saving a useless life."

"What's that to me? I was sent to save it ; an' do so I will. At least, if you're a gentleman, you'll grant what a woman axes you."

He shivered and shut his eyes. Then he felt something hot and soft envelop him, and a snug hood settle about his frozen ears : Joan's scarlet cloak was round him, and she stood bareheaded.

"Come!" she said. "You owe that much to me. I'm a maid as be high-handed with the men-folk. Now the quicker you try to do as I bid, the quicker you'll get out of this cold."

The cordial had brought blood to his cheek and a tingle of warmth to his extremities.

"At least take back your riding-hood. I cannot suffer that. I'm a man again now."

For answer she mounted, and bade him get up behind her.

"I'll live!" he cried. "I'll live to pay you for this day's work!"

He ate and drank again, then attempted twice to mount the black horse ; but, despite Joan's assistance, failed to do so. His weakness was pitiful to see ; therefore the girl dismounted, led him to a shelving stone, and presently helped him into the saddle.

"You shall ride afore me after all," she said ; "and I'll play the woman's part an' sit behind 'e, as I ought."

So they went slowly along, and it was not to support herself that Joan boldly threw her arms round the American's waist, but to prevent him from falling to the ground. He swayed dangerously backwards and forwards and spoke

no word, but rode as she directed him. Therefore presently the singular apparition of a big horse with a man in Joan's cloak upon it, and Joan herself seated behind him, appeared at Sherberton Farm under the dying light of day.

"Poor old gaffer an' gammer Cloberry will have to bide for their Christmas dinner till New Year now," thought the girl.

II

Job Penrose held his private opinions in reserve for a future occasion, and did what man might to succour his fellowman. The American had suffered no radical ill from his exposure, and, after food and sleep, was restored to health within four-and-twenty hours. A foot badly frost-bitten and the exceeding weakness of his state alone marked him for a sufferer.

"You'll bide here till you can travel about again," declared Mr. Penrose; "then, so soon as the snow be melted a bit, you must come along wi' me to Princetown. 'Tis putting a rope round my neck if I let you free, so I hope as you'll return good for good an' put us to no more trouble."

"I hold myself on parole," the stranger answered. "I shall not pay you ill. I owe my life to your daughter, who brought me back to it by a short cut; and I am glad to be alive again."

The prisoner gave his name as Ira Allen, and told them how that he belonged to Vermont, and had been captured when the United States privateer *Copperhead* was taken by the British frigate *Sea Lion*. He found the simple company of the farm folk much to his taste, and in conversation spoke without apparent reserve of his escape from the war prison, of his sailor life, of his home and country.

Joan and her mother soon perceived that the young man was of gentle birth, while, as the days passed by and further

heavy snows made the return to Princetown impossible, Job Penrose, well satisfied that his guest might be trusted in all things, went his way and left Allen much to the company of the women. Each night, however, the sailor spent an hour with Penrose over tobacco and hot spirits. Then he would speak at length upon the agriculture of his own country, and reveal a knowledge and experience that set the older man wondering. It seemed that Vermont and Dartmoor had much in common, for Allen spoke of great mountains cloud-clapped, of rocky glens, of crying rivers and the moss-beds from which they sprang.

“Vermont means ‘green mountains,’ and so our State is named,” explained the American to Joan. “How I should like to show you our hills in their snug coats of hemlock and spruce! But our waters are greater than yours. My home lies beside a noble lake, and while on every hand settlers are toiling, even as they toil upon this desert, we are busy in clearing away forests, that the sun may get to the earth and sweeten it. You have no forests but actually plant trees in your sheltered places.”

They often talked; and sometimes Ira Allen discoursed upon his own affairs, being led to mention them by the accident of his subject. Thus Joan learned that he was a man of estate; that the *Copperhead* was his own venture, and that he had been the commander of her; that he loved his country with all his heart and soul; that his father had defended the independence of his native state, and had boldly advocated her alliance with Great Britain when the United States persisted in rejecting Vermont’s claim for union.

“He threatened to outlaw himself and join the Green Mountain Boys; but all ended well, and though Congress turned its back upon us for a season, yet, through storm and stress, we won our way into the Federal Union; and we won it upon right principles of civil liberty.”

He grew enthusiastic concerning these themes; then, descending to a lower plane, he interested Joan with the natural history of his land. He told of the beavers and their lodges, of the hunters and their game. He described the tapping of the sugar maples and other industries. He explained the manners and customs won from the first New Englanders. Sometimes he delighted Joan by using a Devonshire word that sailed to America with the Pilgrim Fathers in the *Mayflower*, to prosper there from generation to generation. And he was a reflective man, so that occasionally, when he warmed to his subject, he talked somewhat over the heads of the company.

“An equality of rights we claim,” he said to Farmer Penrose. “This, in a new country, will naturally be the only basis for progress. But we are not mad. Nothing can produce an equality of power. Men are made unequal in their capacities by Nature herself. And if in the ferment of a growing state a little scum rises to the top, be sure it will not long remain there. America is still fluid, and the effort to fix it in traditional British moulds was madness. But, at the critical moment, it fell out that short-sighted and avaricious fools and knaves were at the helm in your country, and so the inevitable split was hastened.”

An active interest in the American awoke at Sherberton Farm. Absolute regret touched Mr. Penrose's mind that he must give up the prisoner, and Mrs. Penrose kept her husband waking into the small hours with petitions that he would do no such thing. But while all admired the courteous youth, none saw any escape from the necessity of delivering him to the authorities. The subject often rose, and was usually dropped again with sighs. Then a couple of very determined people discussed the matter privately, being led into that step by sudden discovery of a vital common interest.

Ira Allen and Joan Penrose fell deep in love, and long before the snows melted and the runaway rode back to Princetown on Joan's great horse beside Farmer Penrose, the man and maid had plighted troth. Henceforth they looked fearlessly to the future for every earthly happiness; but of their secret understanding Allen said nothing at this time. He promised the farmer that Mr. Penrose and his goodness should not be forgotten, and he begged only one gift before he returned to the war prison.

"He'm a sentimental chap, though a real gen'leman, an' a gert warrior, an' a mighty man of valour, I'm sure," said Mrs. Penrose. "Whatever do 'e think the man wants for a keepsake? Why, Joan's red riding-hood—the same what she wrapped round him when she found him starved wi cold 'pon Christmas Eve. An' she have gived it to him!"

III

Ira Allen was one of those fortunate prisoners who could rely upon tolerably regular remittances from home. Unlike the larger number of poor captives who waited for the daily pittance from their country, long promised but still delayed, the young scion of a famous Vermont family was wealthy, and his money, which he shared with a little community of friends in Prison No. 4 of the great Dartmoor limbo, mostly went to lessen suffering and alleviate the griefs of the sick.

Ira Allen's punishment proved to be slight, and a week of the cachot—a sort of prison within a prison, where the unruly were confined on bread and water—was all that he got for his intrepid enterprise; because the Commandant happened to be a sportsman, and knew that his prisoner had entirely escaped him but for the weather.

Then, when the wonder was nearly forgotten, there came a day in January upon which Joan and her mother attended the prison market ; and while Mrs. Penrose sold butter and eggs under a sentry's eyes, Joan had some speech with her lover. Presently, diving in her basket, she presented him with a big apple.

“ I kept that one for 'e, Mr. Allen, because I mind how fond you was of them.”

“ Has it any core ? ” he asked, and lowered his voice as he did so.

“ Ay, you'll find one,” she answered.

The great court where this market was held swarmed with business now, and the motley, ragged throng of Americans struggled at the counters, and quickly spent their cash, or exchanged for food their toys and trinkets made of wood and bone. Their aspect had made men laugh or weep. They were clad in yellow rags ; upon their heads were woollen caps, and for shoes they wore a sort of foot-gear soled with wood and spun of yarn. Many had torn up their bed blankets and wrapped them in strips about their toes to escape frost-bite on the ice-cold granite floors of the prison. Not far distant, in the French quarters, a similar scene was played ; and from the grey, mile-long circumference of the gaol arose a cheerful hum of sound. Some bargained ; some walked apart, hopeless and dark of mind ; some of the many boys captured at sea played games. Little throngs of coloured men walked apart from their American compatriots. At one corner of the yard an empty cachot stood—a building low and squat, with barred windows and heavy door. Into this, when it was not occupied by a refractory sailor or soldier, the country people went with their boards and baskets, for they were usually stored there between market days. After the folk had sold all their goods, they removed their stalls to the cachot and then departed.

Ira Allen presently turned to Mrs. Penrose, who to-day had enjoyed unusual custom. The American's friends, knowing particulars of his escape and rescue, regarded both the farmer's wife and her daughter with active interest.

"Several of us wants for ter take a little walk off this mountain, miss," said a grey sailor to Joan. "It gets kinder dull in No. 4 after you've had a year of it. Will you do the same for us you done for Mr. Allen, if we slip the sojers and come ter see you?"

"Ess fay!" said Joan; whereupon the grey man declared that she ought to belong to his country.

Meantime Allen paid Mrs. Penrose for a suit of clothes that her husband had lent him; and he added money for Joan's riding-hood.

"I'm glad to see that she has another," he said. "The colour suits her nobly. Never was such a lovely girl sent to cheer sad eyes."

"She'm a bowerly maiden, though no better'n me at her age," declared Mrs. Penrose. "An' now about them geese for next week, Mr. Allen? Joan tells me you want half a dozen. Be that true? They'll come rather dear, I'm afeard."

"'Tis my birthday next week. I shall be twenty-one, mother, and I'm giving a little feast, you see. Yes; six, please."

"Joan will pluck 'em herself."

"And stuff them herself?"

For answer Mrs. Penrose deliberately closed one of her bright black eyes. Then, picking up her board and trestles, she carried them off to the cachot, and a few moments later had left the market with her daughter.

IV

In due time the geese arrived, and certain of Ira Allen's

private friends and old shipmates made merry. They ate the birds to the bones, and drank good health to their host and speedy freedom to themselves in three bottles of sloe gin, also purchased from Mrs. Penrose.

Then came a market day in February when the girl and her mother served as usual, and the customary crowd circled round Joan.

"Your red-riding coat and purty face under it do draw us like a candle draws a moth," said the old grey salt. "But for my part I could wish the cape another colour: 'tis too much like the sojer's lobster-red to my taste."

"Where's Mr. Allen?" inquired Joan. "I don't see him to-day."

A man or two winked.

"I seen him a minute since by the cachot as we came inter market," answered an American; but the elderly sailor contradicted him.

"Not you, Peter Boyd. He's ill."

"Ill!" cried the girl; "and I'd brought him such a beautiful bit o' streaky bacon."

"In hospital. Only a bit of a chill, I reckon. No call ter wherit. He'll be all right again presently, if he thinks you've thought about him."

"'Twould be a good job for every ragtail amongst us if that man could escape again and get ter home," declared Peter Boyd. "He's rich and clever. I calculate as things would soon be on the bounce if he could go ter Congress and tell 'em the truth about the way we're treated in this bowery."

"Give him time. He's built ter be a boss. He'll slip out yet," declared a third sailor.

Then the business of the market proceeded; but Joan had lost her usual spirit. She was gloomy and distracted, and found no ready answers for the genial men who flocked

round her little stall. Business was less brisk than usual, and it drew to dusk before Mrs. Penrose had finished.

"Now, ma'am," said one Seth Rowe, a sentry, "the bell went five minutes ago, an' you're the last. I shall get into trouble if you keep me with this key any longer."

Market was ended now, and the great courtyard grew rapidly empty. The captives were marshalled and marched back into their quarters at Prison No. 4, and all the country folk had gone, or were going. Mrs. Penrose packed her few unsold products into a basket, and bid Joan take the boards and trestles to their place in the cachot.

"What's come to 'em all?" she grumbled. "I shall have to go an' set up shop among they French frogs. These American chaps be 'out o' money an' out o' clothes' as the rhyme sez."

"They can't get their country to take no count of 'em, seemingly," the sentry answered. "That chap who stands for 'em at Plymouth don't care a cuss whether they live or die. He comed to see 'em an' hear their story a while ago; but so soon as he heard that the small-pox was reigning in one o' the French prisons, he bolted as if he'd smelt the devil."

Mrs. Penrose walked to the gate. "Tell my darter to come along. Us ride home pillion together. I'll wait for her at the corner."

But Joan had already appeared, and her mother, in very ill humour after a bad day, rated her.

"Come on, you caddling, loafing maiden, do! 'Tis your fault as I've got this heavy basket to take home, an' I'll thank you to carry it. Here's night-fall a'ready."

Without speaking the girl took the basket, nodded to sentry Rowe, and went out of the prison before her mother. Then the great gate crashed behind them and the soldier, locking it and making fast the cachot also, went on his way.

Darkness quickly fell, and glimmering rows of lights flashed from the barred windows of the prisons. Behind them was a humming as of mighty hives.

But Princetown had not yet seen its last of the Penrose family, for after dark, about eight o'clock, the farmer himself arrived in a condition of frantic excitement. He was violently agitated, burst into the ward-room at the main gate, and clamoured to see the Commandant at once.

"Something be much amiss," he said, "an' I must know if anybody here have got anything to do with it. Is that chap Allen, as I brought back hither after Christmas, escaped 'e again?"

They assured him that such a thing was quite impossible.

"They are now answering to their names," explained a turnkey. "If he's not there, I shall know it in five minutes."

"One of the Yankees told me he was in hospital," replied another official; but an orderly from that establishment contradicted him.

"No, he isn't—anyway, he wasn't when I came off duty an hour ago."

"Well, the case is this," explained Penrose. "Coming home-along with my wife three hour ago, my darter 'pears suddenly to have gone out of her mind. The missis tramped back, on foot, so white as a dog's tooth, an' told me how, just when they reached the bridge over the river down under my place, Joan ups an' axes her mother to onlight off the hoss, so as she may tighten his belly-band. But the instant moment missis got off, away went Joan at a gallop. Just a twinkle of her red hood in the dimpsy-light an' she was gone like a pixy. Now, where be she? an' where be Ira Allen?—for I'll take my oath he knows about it."

As though it answered him, a bell rang suddenly, and clanged a harsh alarum across the night. Lanterns began

to flash from dark doorways ; a rattle of arms was heard, and orders echoed loudly.

“ They’re calling out the guard ! ” cried a soldier.

Everybody hastened from the ward-room, and a moment later Mr. Penrose was hurrying across the empty yard of Prison No. 4 with half a dozen other men.

In the profound darkness he presently found himself alone. Then he ran against somebody approaching from the other direction. It was the soldier, Seth Rowe ; and he recognised Mr. Penrose and called him aside.

“ You’re well met. ’Tis thought that Ira Allen, that gentleman Yankee, have got off again, an’ they rumour ’twas your daughter Joan that helped him. Come here under cover of the cachot wall, an’ I’ll tell what I know.”

But Seth appeared to know very little. He was only aware that Allen had not answered to his name, and could not yet be found within the gaol. He began to explain that Joan and her mother were the last to leave the market, when suddenly a violent knocking close at hand made him start back.

“ There’s somebody in the cachot ! ” he cried.

“ I wish ’twas the man we’ve troubled about,” answered the farmer.

“ ’Tis just within belief I locked him up accidental,” answered Seth Rowe, “ though the cachot ban’t a place they go into for choice. An’ this one’s seldom used. The market folk mostly keep their things in it.”

“ If you was to open it instead of talking, ’twould be wiser,” answered the farmer, and Seth hastened for the key.

A few minutes later he had flung back the great iron-bound door of the chamber.

“ Now, if you be there, the quicker you come out an’ save more trouble the better, Mr. Allen,” cried Seth.

Then a flash of red broke from the darkness, and Mr. Penrose's daughter appeared.

V

Joan alone was cool and collected.

"Thank you, Seth Rowe," she said. "'Twas unfortunate I got locked in at end of market. Now us'll be off home-along, father, so quick as we can. I'm tired an' frozen wi' cold."

"But—but—" began the sentry; then Joan stopped him.

"I know all you be going to say; but there ban't no time for 'buts.'" "

"'Tis a hanging job," began Seth.

"Yes, for me. You don't want to hang me, I suppose?" "

"Come!" he answered. "Come along so quick as ever you can, both of 'e. Don't tell me another word, for God's sake. I know too much a'ready. Follow me, an' keep in the dark."

Mr. Penrose, now alive to the awful danger in which his daughter stood, exerted his ingenuity, followed Rowe with all stealth, and soon succeeded in getting himself and Joan out of the prison unobserved. The place was in an uproar, and by keeping in shadow and avoiding the hurrying officials, Joan and her father, under Rowe's guidance, were quickly clear of immediate danger.

Then Mr. Penrose raged while she told him the truth, and explained that her life was wrapped up for ever with young Ira Allen's. She had brought him the necessary articles of apparel, hidden in the geese; then, by previous arrangement, he entered the cachot while the market progressed and concealed himself there.

"He walked out as natural as need be in the red riding-hood, an' minced in his going just like a maiden. 'Twas

dark, an' his face was hidden, so that mother's own self didn't know him," explained Joan.

"She must have known him and helped him," said Mr. Penrose resolutely.

"I hope that they'll take her word for it that she didn't," answered Joan calmly; "else she'll be hanged so well as me."

"An' where's the man now?"

"He's got my horse, an' he's going down to—no matter where. Then, if all falls out well, he'll sail across to France."

"To do that he must have been in touch with the prisoners on parole at Ashburton."

"He was," said Joan. "You may remember that I went to Ashburton last week. I met a gentleman who knew Mr. Allen. Them on parole are allowed to walk one mile upon the high road, you know."

"You'll be hanged, as sure as fate, when 'tis all known."

"Very like; but I'm too tired to think about it to-night, my dear. Do 'e let me get home-along an' eat an' sleep," she answered.

Within an hour Joan had returned home. Her mother poured hard words upon her, and, despite Mr. Penrose's incredulity, stoutly stuck to it that she was ignorant of the deception.

"The man spoke with her voice an' walked with her steps. Of course I couldn't see his face, for 'twas near dark," she said.

"You'll get nobody to believe that, however," declared the farmer. "'Pears to me afore many days be passed I shall be childless an' a widow-man, for law's law, an' this be a job for Jack Ketch."

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Penrose; "come to bed, Joan. 'Tis a icicle down a body's back to hear that dreadful speech. I'll lie with 'e to-night, else you'll have the terrors."

Together the women departed, but hardly were the last

lights out at Sherberton Farm, when torches gleamed across the moor, and there came the tramp of men and the clink of metal.

A great thunder fell upon the farm door from a sword-hilt, and Mr. Penrose, wakened out of uneasy slumber, was commanded in the King's name to open his house and surrender his wife and his daughter. In a frenzy he called to them and sought them, where they slept together; but no voice answered him, and, entering their chamber, he found it empty. Both women had vanished.

VI

Six months after the final escape of Ira Allen from Princetown and the disappearance of Mrs. Penrose and Joan, there came a long letter to Sherberton Farm, and a proclamation for the Americans in the war prison.

"Fellow-citizens," wrote the agent at Plymouth, "I am authorised by the Government of the United States to allow you one-penny-halfpenny per day, for the purpose of procuring you tobacco and soap, and I earnestly trust that it will tend towards a great relief in your present circumstances."

"God be praised," said a soldier to a sailor, "the consarned old country haven't forgot us after all! Now we'll have a swipe o' money directly."

"'Tis Ira Allen haven't forgot us," answered the sailor. "I kinder thought he'd got ter France and so ter home. This is his work, or I don't know nothing. I'll drink ter the man wi' every farthing of my first week's money, and durn the soap!"

Elsewhere, Farmer Penrose, after long days of the wifeless and childless life he had foretold, was confronted with great, yet not unexpected news.

“ You see, my old dear,” wrote his wife, “ that Mr. Allen knowed just what would come after, and he’d got it all very well managed, where we was to meet him ; and that chap, Seth Rowe, knowed everything really. And he was going to let Joan out of the cachot and smuggle her off just when he runned against you. And very well paid the chap was for his trouble. Well, us slipped away so soon as you was asleep, and when we waved a lantern to un; Mr. Allen comed down-along from where he was hid up the valley with Joan’s black horse and another he’d got from Ashburton. And away us all went. Next day we laid so snug as need be in they gert woods by Dart river ; and next night we was off in a little old boat for France. The American gentleman to Ashburton arranged it, but they couldn’t go themselves, poor souls, because they’d gived theer solum words not to run away. Then in a week a great ship went for America, and we went along with her over the deep. And Mrs. Allen—that’s your darter Joan, for they was married in France—has a mansion beside a huge lake by the name of Champlain out here. And her man is so good as gold, and made of gold for that matter. She’ll be a lady in her speech afore you come out here ; and I hope, my old dear, you’ll come, for ’tis a butivul land, with a better soil and climate to it than Dartymoor, and Mr. Allen have got a powerful deal of money, and one farm in partickler of three thousand acres be properly made for you and me. And he wants us to have it so bad that he won’t sleep easy of nights until you come. And I’d return home-along for ye, though the deep sea be a terror to my stomach, but I can’t, because of the Lords of Parliament, as would hang me for sartain. So I be going to leave my bones here, and no harm done to nobody. And if you’ll credit it, in the hall of Joan’s mansion house there hangs they two red riding-hoods side by side, to be a sign, Mr. Allen sez, for

future generations of his family, which be going to start afore next Christmas by the mercy of the Lord. And if 'tis a boy like its father, so much to the good, for he's the properest man that ever I seed but you."

"Be blessed if I don't go after 'em!" said the farmer to himself. "'Tis a gert upheaval of nature, no doubt; but the body of a man can't bide in one place if his goods be in another. Twice a day shall I pray God to defend me from all American ideas. But three thousand acres! That's farming!"

THE END

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